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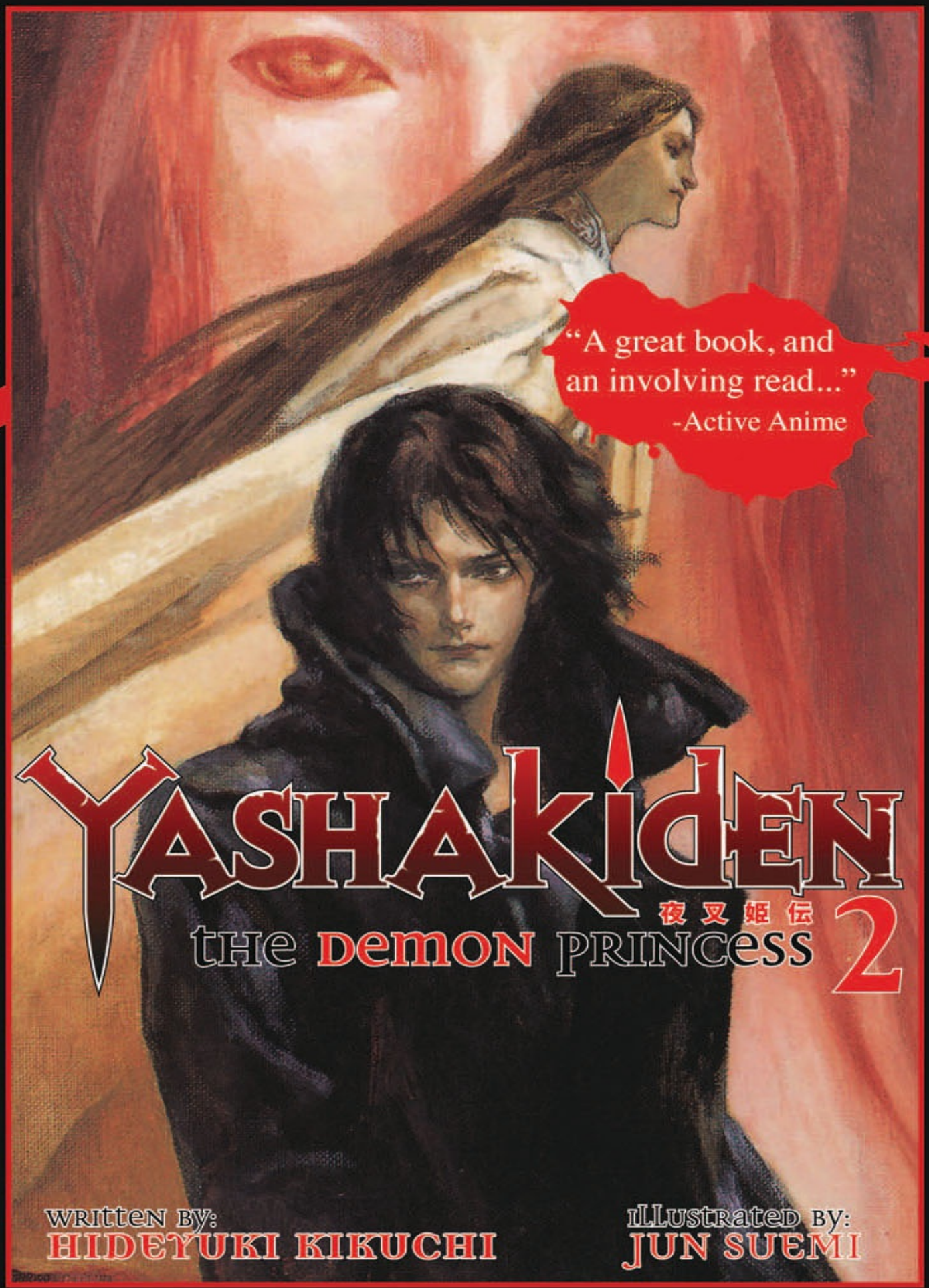


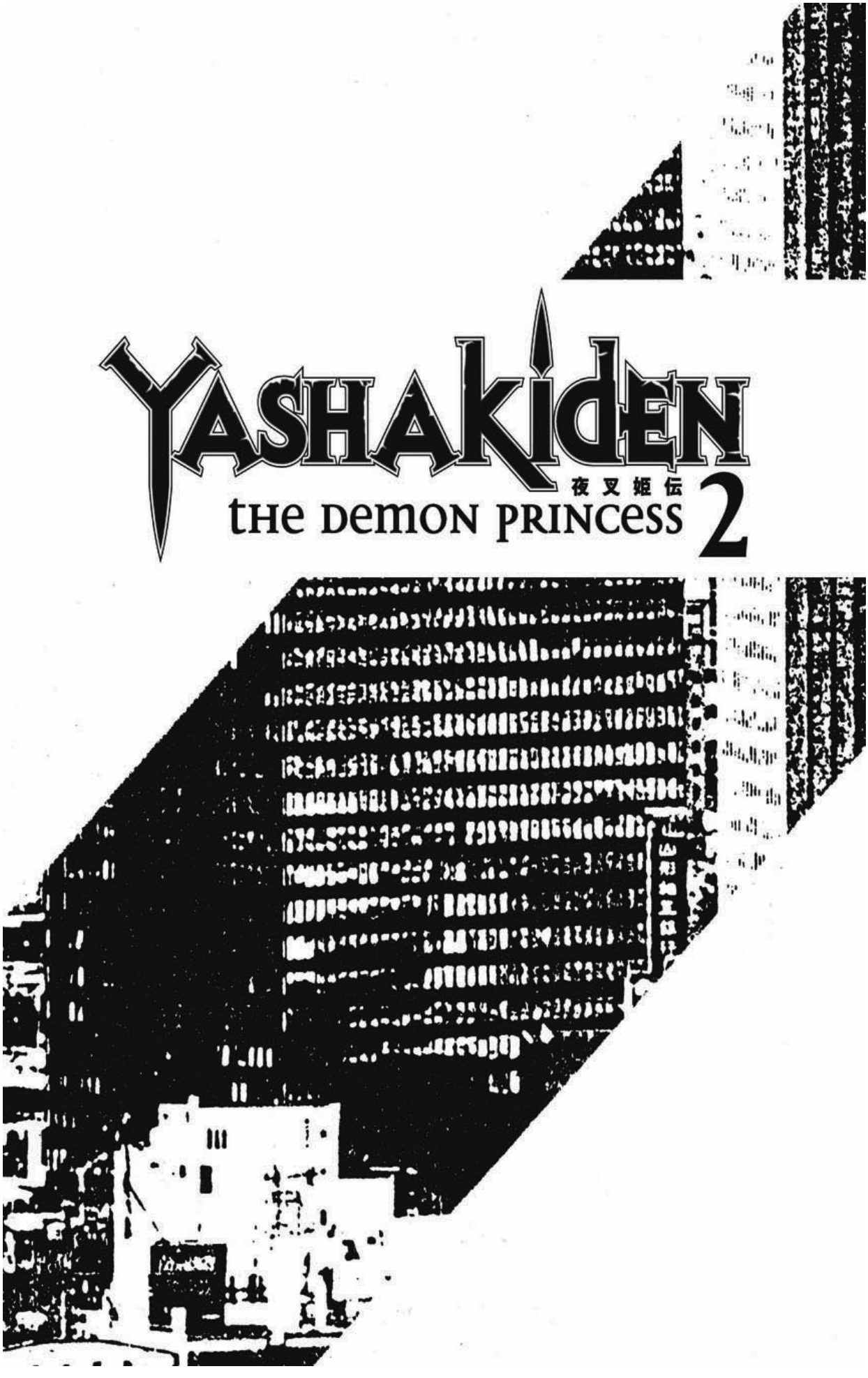
"A great book, and an involving read..."
-Active Anime

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 2

WRITTEN BY:
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

ILLUSTRATED BY:
JUN SUEMI


YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝
THE DEMON PRINCESS 2

Author's Bio

"It looks like those planned three volumes have turned into five," observes the author of *Yashikiden: The Demon Princess* with a smile. As with any masterpiece, the child has exceeded the parent's initial expectations and continues to blaze a trail on its own. Forthcoming developments will only make his books all the harder for his readers to put down.

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in 1949 in Choshi, Chiba Prefecture. While studying law at Aoyama University, he participated in the college's "mystery and detective novel" club. After graduation, he published stories in *doujinshi* magazines and translated science fiction while working as a magazine reporter. His debut as a novelist came in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*.

In 1985, the highly-anticipated *Makaikou* was published to great acclaim, propelling Hideyuki Kikuchi into bestselling author status like a rocket. That status continues to this day, making him one of Japan's busiest and most popular writers.

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝
THE DEMON PRINCESS 2

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
JUN SUEMI

English Translation by
Eugene Woodbury

DMP
DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING
Los Angeles

Yashakiden: The Demon Princess Vol. 2

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Written by Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrated by Jun Suemi

English Translation by Eugene Woodbury.

English Edition Published by:

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING

A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300

Gardena, CA 90248

USA

www.dmpbooks.com

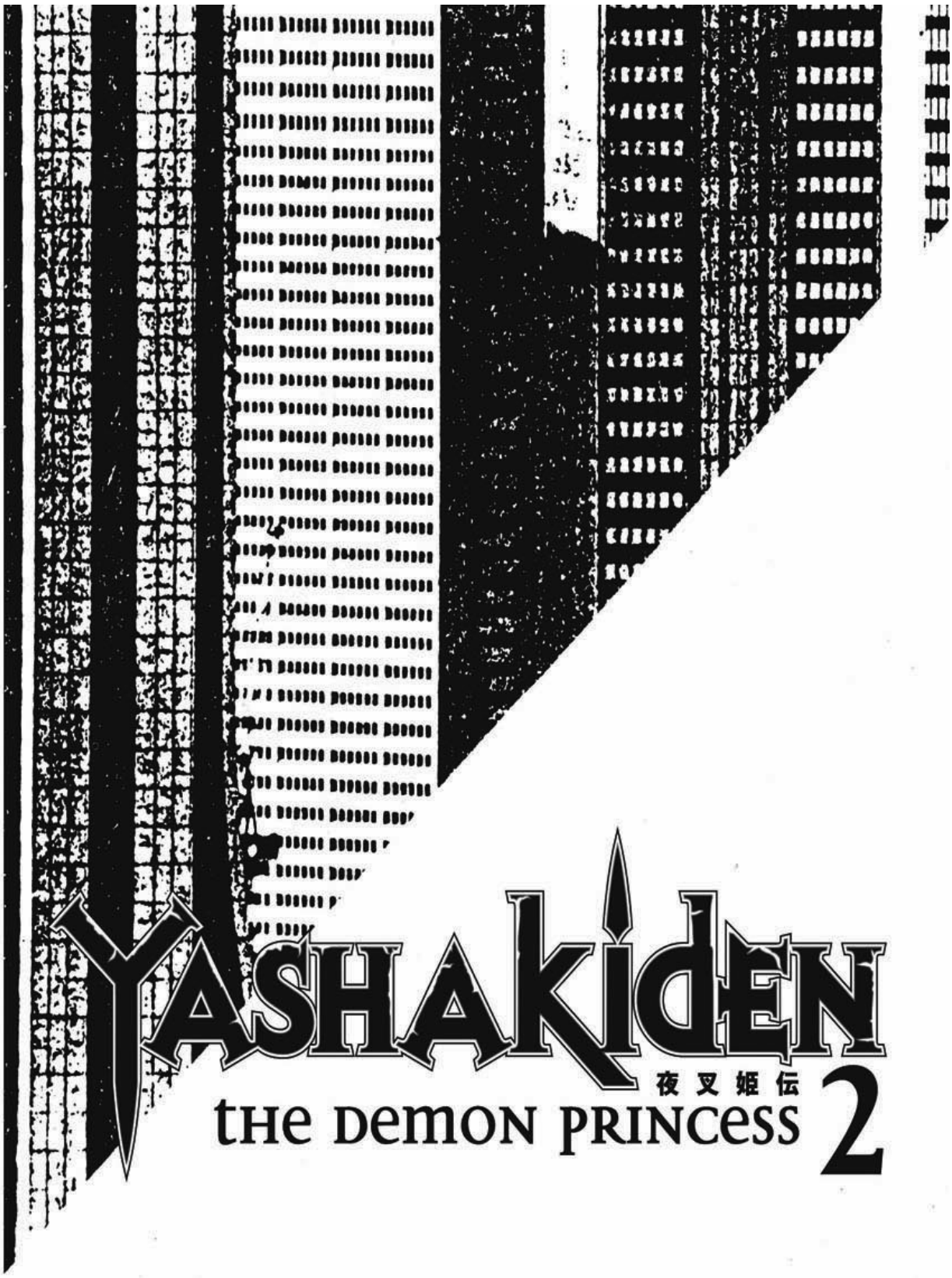
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request

First Edition: May 2010

ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-146-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada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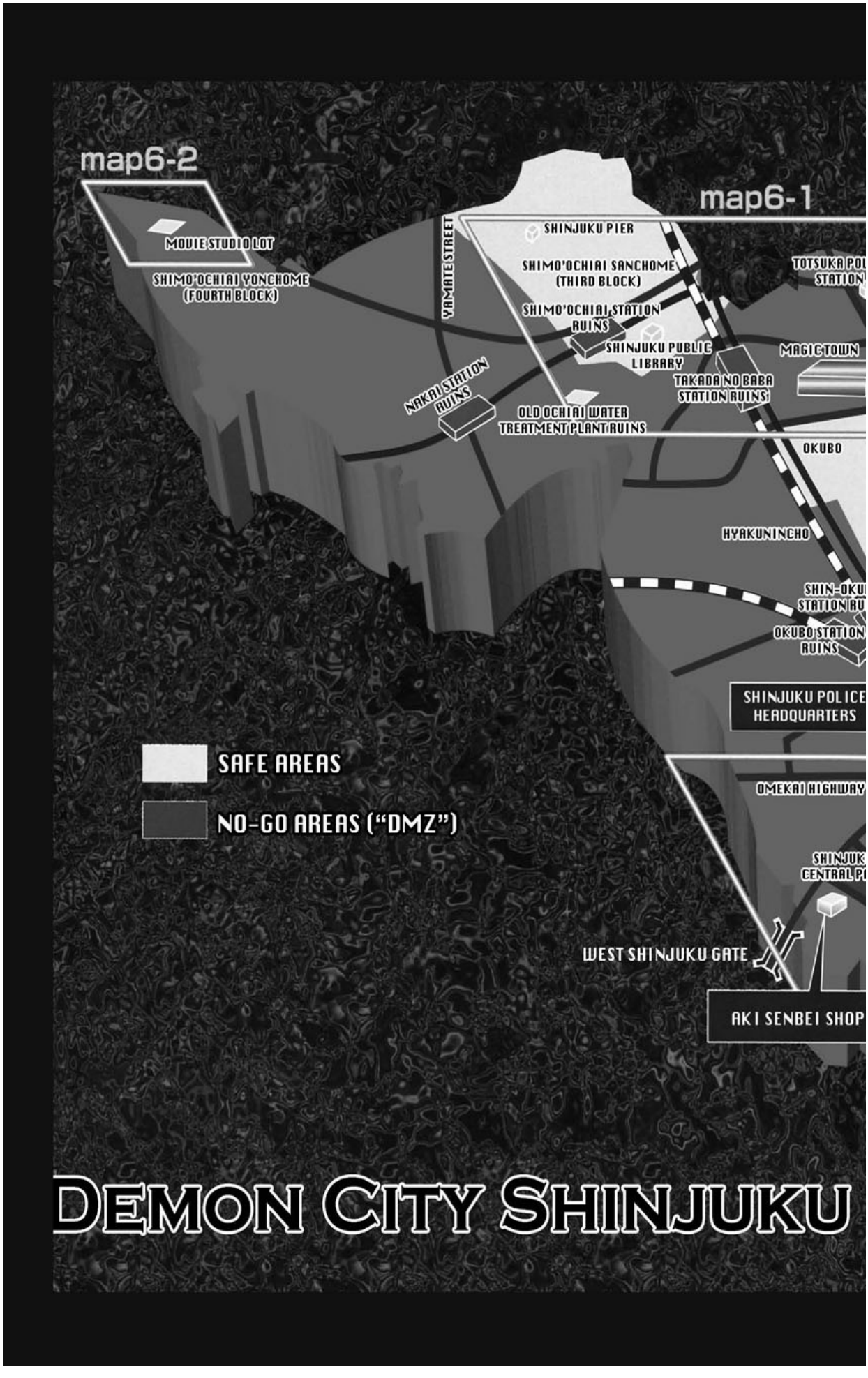
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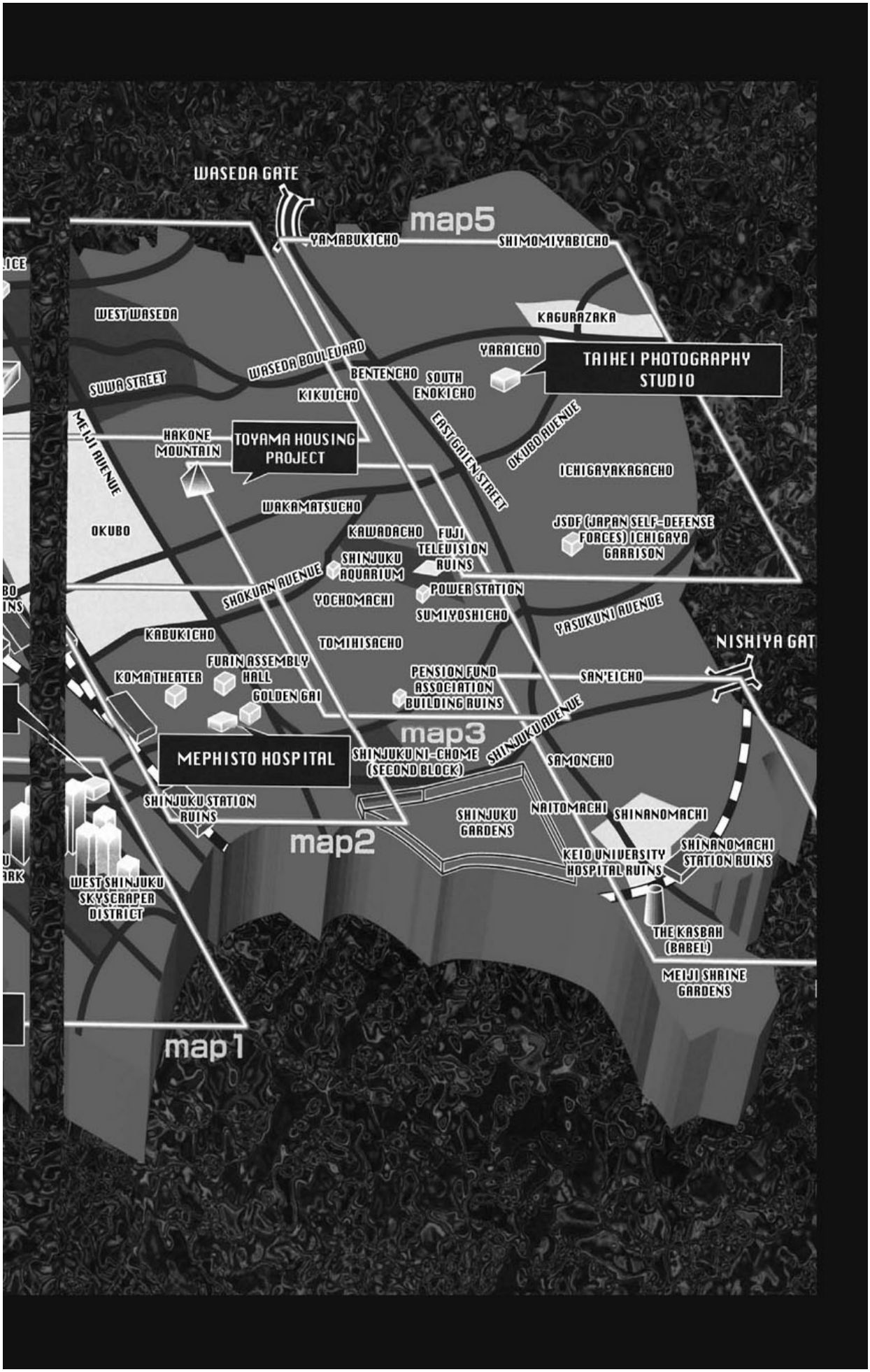
SAFE AREAS
NO-GO AREAS ("DMZ")
OMEKAI HIGHWAY
WEST SHINJUKU GATE
AKI SENBEI SHOP
DEMON CITY SHINJUKU


WASEDA GATE
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YAMABUKICHO
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BENTENCHO
SOUTH ENOKICHO
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MEIJI AVENUE
HAKONE MOUNTAIN
TOYAMA HOUSING PROJECT
EAST GREEN STREET
OKUBO AVENUE
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map1

Author's Note

As with any series, each new installment should be more interesting than the last, and *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess, Vol. II* should hopefully prove no exception to this rule. A crimson shadow has fallen across Shinjuku. There are no timeouts in this struggle to the death. Setsura has been badly battered and Mephisto is working overtime to keep it together.

I didn't originally intend to push the story into so many precarious corners. It developed that way naturally. The enemies this time around are strong and terrifying, forces that must be reckoned with.

Victory was once assured for Setsura and Mephisto. Now the future is looking less certain. But I'm not the slightest bit displeased. *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess* has shaken off its bridle and is running free.

Hideyuki Kikuchi

Main Characters

Setsura Aki

The manager and owner of a Demon City *senbei* shop and a P.I. agency. A handsome man with magical powers literally at his fingertips, he defeats his enemies by wielding strands of sub-micron thin "devil wire."

Mephisto

It is rumored that the "Demon City Physician," as beautiful as he is feared, can even bring the dead back to life.

Princess

The Chinese vampire Biki—as gorgeous as she is evil—has wandered the world for four thousand years in search of a safe refuge for herself and her followers.

Kikiou

This crafty old warlock is Princess's principal retainer. He desires to subjugate all of Demon City Shinjuku.

Ryuuki

A later addition to Princess's retinue but also a vampire, he plays the mesmerizing ghost koto *Silent Night* and has a powerful, death-dealing *qi* at his command.

Shuuran

A vampire and servant of Princess, she can fashion killer vampire dolls from her own blood.

Takako Kanan

A college student specializing in ancient Chinese history, she is swept into supernatural conflict because of her obsession with the mysterious Daji from the Hsia Dynasty.

Yakou

A vampire who lives in Demon City's Toyama housing project, he is the grandson of the Elder, who was defeated and killed by Princess.

The Story So Far

A vicious gang of four from China appears in Demon City. Nightly vampire attacks on the citizens of Shinjuku quickly follow. The victims are brought to Mephisto's impregnable hospital, but these vampires are not deterred, invading the hospital's layers of defenses and baring their fangs before Setsura and Mephisto.

The blood-drenched battle for Shinjuku has begun. Along with her three retainers—Kikiou, Ryuuki, and Shuuran—Princess has surmounted four thousand years of space and time in order to seize control of Demon City.

To fight these immortal enemies, Setsura and Mephisto have allied themselves with a clan of vampires living in the Toyama housing project, led by the Elder and his grandson Yakou. But Setsura is seriously injured by Ryuuki's powerful *qi* and Princess slays the Elder.

Now her evil claws reach deep into Mephisto Hospital, where Takako Kanan watches over the unconscious Setsura.

Part One: Loving The Devil

Chapter One

The woman's voice rose up from the depths of a dark land, filled with a kind of elation and malice that would make the blackest of hearts shudder with fear.

"So this is Setsura Aki?"

"You—you are—" Takako Kanan gasped. Red-hot fear shot through her. Her own voice sounded like it belonged to somebody else.

Without giving her a second glance, the woman approached Setsura's bedside. Abruptly she stopped. "You are Setsura's woman?"

Takako's body shook. Terror ate at her insides like bad brandy, leaving her intoxicated with dread. It was the combination of the woman's voice and the undamaged half of her face. The ugliness of the burned, inflamed part elevated the rest to an unimaginably haunting degree.

As horrifying as the sight was, she could not look away.

"You needn't answer. You are not one of the attending nurses. You must be a relative or a friend. I wonder whether I should first make you my servant?"

The woman fell silent, assessing her reaction, as Takako's face turned a ghastly shade of gray.

“Don’t worry. I prefer not to be waited on by those of humble birth. Though I’m not so discriminating as Kikiou. Serving as witness to this man’s death is a role that would suit you fine. And yet—”

She raised her hands and gazed at the faint red rivulets running down her seductively fair skin.

“These wounds to my neck and my legs. Still unhealed. Back during the Wei Dynasty, not even the sword of Zhao Yun could inflict such wounds. Ah, here is what Kikiou feared and what made Ryuuki retreat without accomplishing his objective.”

Takako didn’t understand that the wounds had been inflicted by the defensive “fence” Setsura had woven around them. It entangled any object that drew near, mercilessly drawing and quartering anything that did not stop in its tracks.

Nor could she comprehend the monstrous nature of the woman who’d calmly pulled it apart.

“But all for naught.” She turned to Setsura, “In deference to such comeliness, I will allow you to die with your features intact.”

All at once she was standing at the head of the bed. She slowly pressed her hands down. The edges and ends of her mother-of-pearl-like fingernails at the tips of her alabaster fingers were honed like knives.

The comatose Setsura was beyond salvation now. Her hand reached his neck. Takako tried to scream but her throat was glued shut. All she could do was watch.

The woman gathered her strength in her hands. They shook slightly as they spread apart. A shiver ran down her fingers. Her nails touched the line of Setsura's jaw, pressing into the flesh.

Takako focused her consciousness on everything she was seeing. There was no way she could deal with this woman by herself. She had to call for help, but had only two options: the call button above the headboard or the micro-cell phone inside the cuff of her sleeve.

The woman was standing right next to the headboard, so that option was out. The cell phone was activated by a switch and then voice controlled. Except she couldn't move her hands or open her mouth.

Takako pushed her consciousness down into her feet, staking everything on her ability to control her *qi* with her mind. A lukewarm sensation rose from beneath her feet, moving at a glacial speed. How long would it take to spread through her entire body?

This woman could kill Setsura a hundred times over in the meantime.

The woman's white hands traveled from his chin up the sides of his face. Takako felt a small start in her chest. The shock of pure surprise. The woman was stroking Setsura's cheeks the way a loving mother would her child.

"How handsome."

Takako couldn't believe what her eyes and ears were telling her.

"What a lovely man. Enough to excite even me."

Her voice filled the room like a winter mist. Setsura's cheeks deformed beneath her hands, his nose and mouth shuddered. The vampiress caressed him with an otherworldly passion, as if to inscribe his entire being into the memory of her skin.

Takako was seized by a profound feeling of disgust. She directed her thoughts to the *qi* gathered around her ankles. *Rise*, she commanded. And it rose. To her knees, to her thighs.

"But you must die. If I let you live, you will become our most terrible enemy. If I let you die without tasting death, my heart would never be at peace. I could never tolerate that in myself."

The woman pulled away. Her mood shifted in a flash. She drew her brows and curled her lips. Her nature had prompted another change, and this was the look of the blood-starved demon. To Takako, it was as if blinds were being drawn across her shining eyes.

Takako's *qi* had reached the small of her back. From there it should suffuse her spine and circulate through her entire body.

She was seized by despair. The woman's form—that Takako could see only from the back—cast off a blindingly demonic vibe as her head swooped down toward Setsura's throat. Fear and despair forced the *qi* through Takako's veins. Her hand reached the device in her sleeve. Her mouth mumbled the words.

The woman straightened. Takako's eyes were drawn to Setsura's throat. There was no trail of blood. The china-like skin remained unmarred by the accursed wounds.

A strange and unforeseen change blossomed within him. Takako's

countenance dissolved into a rapturous expression. The woman's also. Setsura's soul had somehow detected the true nature of his enemy and had aroused the only defensive safeguard left to him.

Setsura's face seemed to glow. Create the ultimate ideal of beauty and it would subjugate every heart and soul presented to it. Held up before the eyes of a woman who denied every article of philosophy, religion and ethics, and even she would have no choice but to submit in ecstasy.

Just like the servants who watched over the vampire's casket.

Struggling against the invisible spell of this beauty, the woman raised her right hand up to her face.

"This night—" Her voice shook with sorrow and joy. "This night I have seen the worst of all my days. *But I shall not be defeated by this mere fledgling! Look!*"

She raked her hand across her brows. A mist of blood erupted from her face. In order to release herself from the curse of Setsura's beauty, she had torn out her own eyes.

In that moment, Takako felt the unearthly hold on her falling away. Replaced by the bloody physical grip of the woman's hand seizing her wrist. The ghastly, gruesome face smiled. The blood from her eye sockets poured down the scorched side of her face.

In turn, the unscarred side of her face—now stained red—was all the more entrancing. It left Takako breathless.

"I had no use for you from the start." The blood dribbled into the corners of her mouth. "But I have underestimated my enemies in this

city. Ah, I hear the security guards coming. To the extent that you are related to Setsura, you will prove useful in luring him to hell."

Like a cold, mechanical arm, her free hand tilted back Takako's chin. She brought her ravaged face against Takako's left carotid artery.

No fear or pain—just a brief sting—and then something thick and warm spread through her veins. A fleeting sense of sorrow grazed her heart. It felt like the time when she was a child and got separated from her parents in the bustling crowds of Asakusa in Tokyo.

The woman pulled her head away. The door opened. The security guards rushed in. They aimed the paralyzer guns in their right hands, but hesitated, startled by the terrifying expression on her face and unable to decide whether the blood-smeared woman was the enemy.

That moment passed. Three voices chorused together: "Freeze! Don't resist or we'll shoot!"

"Get out of the way," came the return command. More of a rebuke.

Struck by her natural elegance, her majesty, and the overwhelming power of her demonic presence, the three men unconsciously retreated several steps.

One managed to come to his senses and pull the trigger. At the same moment a whirling white wind raced among them. The throats of the three erupted in a shower of blood.

Even blinded, the extrasensory abilities of this enchantress were

the equal of a normal person's eyes.

From the moment Takako raised the alarm, the scene from the hospital room was being displayed on the security monitors. The surveillance room supervisor watching the monitors goggled. The monitors didn't show the woman standing by Setsura's bed. He'd dispatched a patrol more on the gut feeling that there was something *off* about what he was looking at.

He watched the girl's body stiffen, as if held tightly by some invisible force. He watched the three guards rush in and suddenly come to a halt, their attention focused on somebody—or *something*—other than her. And then a second later, watched as the blood sprayed from their throats.

Security immediately went to DEFCON 1.

Guards encased in mechanized body armor suits raced toward the room, while every critical entranceway and exit on every floor was sealed off with a force field that could repel a battle tank. The nozzles of heavy-grade paralyzer guns and tranquilizer gas jets jutted from the ceilings and walls.

Banned elsewhere, the military weapons in the armory—principally the neural pathway and DNA disruptors—were powered up by compact nuclear batteries.

After this SSDL ("Super-Science Defense Line"), the SPDL ("Super-Psychological Defense Line") engaged, though only on the upper floors. After that, the SLDZ ("Spiritual Last Defense Zone")—whose actual functioning only the hospital director truly comprehended—awaited the intruder.

Everything was in perfect working order and ready to go. Except that the worst disaster to befall Mephisto Hospital was not an invading force. It had been born in its very heart.

The military-grade mechanized exoskeletons were equipped with 1,000 horsepower engines powered by a thermo-electric nuclear furnace. The 10mm high-grade silicon composite armor could withstand a direct hit by 120mm smooth bore anti-tank munitions.

Embedded in the armor were tranquilizer guns, multi-beam lasers, and staking missile launchers. Any one of these weapon systems was an equal match for at least three squadrons of the commando units held in such high regard at police headquarters.

It took no longer than a snap of the fingers for ten guardsmen to strap on their mech suits. They rode the emergency elevators from the armory to the floor holding Setsura. And there encountered the beautiful woman coming down the hallway.

They couldn't believe their eyes. A single blast from one of the sonic paralyzers lining the hallway would knock out a whale. The woman must have received a thousand hits already.

With the captain taking the point, the guardsmen spread out in a flying V formation. But the woman didn't stop.

Such a horrible—and beautiful—countenance.

The contradictions bubbling up from their most primal memories threw their minds into confusion. In response, the metabolism monitoring devices strapped to their right arms squirted two-milligram doses of beta blockers into their veins.

“Freeze!” the captain ordered.

She didn’t.

“Number two team, engage with paralyzers. If that doesn’t work, three and four teams, use lasers.”

The orders flashed through encrypted signals to the rest of the team. The captain aimed and focused the paralyzer on the woman’s chest.

The colorless, odorless ultrasonic wave wrapped around her body.

She stretched out her arm. The fear and the drug-induced sense of calm combined to slow the captain’s retreat. Her hand struck the breastplate of his mech armor—a quick, willowy movement that seemed to bend the air.

Along with his mech exoskeleton—that weighed a ton—the captain was sent tumbling through the air. The captain’s mech struck the one behind him, and the two of them together cartwheeled—as if in slow motion—into the third team.

Following after it, the woman broke through the third line of the flying V. The force imparted by that hand alone was difficult to fathom.

Red laser light painted her body from every angle. A single thousand-degree pulse that could vaporize a diamond didn’t raise so much as a cigarette burn on the woman’s fair skin.

The sound of motors and gears hummed to life, and the last team

of mechs rushed her like linebackers, aiming for the shoulders and torso. She hopped backwards and pivoted to the side, dancing like a white butterfly fluttering out of danger, while ripping off the arms of mechs. With the arms still inside them.

The guardsmen were veiled in an unnatural haze. The growl of high-torque electric motors filled the hallway. A whirl of bloody fog. The exoskeleton control systems were out of control. The extreme vibrations were shaking their operators to pieces.

Under normal circumstances, the internal medical monitoring devices initiated treatment and self-repair. The ranges of movement in a limb were restricted according to the damage in the affected area. If there was any possibility—even a one in a thousand chance—of the trouble externalizing and a meltdown occurring, the nuclear power cells would shut down.

The one variable impossible to predict—and thus impossible to program into the operating system firmware—was made real by the woman's slender hands.

"It's out of control!" shouted the guardsman missing an arm.

"We're going to self-destruct!" screamed the one with blood erupting from his shoulders.

The still-standing guardsmen had to act immediately. Three of them circled around the back of the shuddering, shaking exoskeletons and focused their lasers on the central nerve systems of the mechs.

At close range, the direct hits sent electromagnetic pulses

coursing through the mech superstructures, splitting the metallic skin like aluminum beer cans. The spinning sound of the motors suddenly diminished and the mechs—their limbs until that moment a blur of vibration—slumped forward and stopped.

"What about the woman?" groaned Uehara, having just shot his own partner to death.

The other guardsmen looked in the direction they'd last seen her. "She kept on going," said the one plastered against the wall. "She went right over our heads. She fucking *flew*. And the side of her face —*shit*—after seeing that—I'll never sleep again—"

"Tell it to your shrink! You hold the line no matter what! After her! Captain!"

"I can't move," the captain grumbled. He was flat on his back, wrecked and disabled. The two guardsmen who'd backed him up were in the same condition. "My power cells shut down. This suit won't come off without an auxiliary unit. Uehara, you're in charge. Get going!"

"Yes, sir!"

Four guardsmen took off running, their undamaged mechs barely making a whisper.

Of the original ten, two were dead, three were disabled and immobilized, and the one plastered against the wall turned the laser aperture attached to his right wrist around to focus on his own forehead—almost impatiently, it seemed.

Chapter Two

The sun perched high in the sky. Almost as if it never set in this world. Indeed, Doctor Mephisto had observed that the shape and length of the shadows cast on the ground never changed.

The sun, the forests, the lakes and streams were probably all man-made. Though even Mephisto couldn't hazard to guess what manner of advanced technology made it possible.

A little over twenty minutes had passed since he'd dodged the heat ray—what might be called an ancient laser. The cool breeze flitting along the path caressed Mephisto's cheeks. It came from the surrounding woods and contained within it a pleasant dampness as well.

He spotted the dark surface of the water beyond the trees no more than another dozen paces on.

"Water follows upon fire," Mephisto said to himself. In the same instant he heard the sound of splashing water coming nearer.

Directly ahead of him, a luxuriant purple boat approached the shore. In the center of the boat stood a girl in a purple dress. She was as pretty and vivacious as a freshly-painted picture. A sense of calm filled the forest, quieting any desire to ask where she'd come from.

The hull of the boat scraped against the sand and stopped. The girl called out, "Come. My mistress bade me meet you here. The way

by land is hot and long." She bowed.

She wasn't the seductress called Shuuran. The shape and complexion of her face, its brittle beauty, was closer to that of a doll.

"Will your mistress be waiting where this boat is going?"

"Yes," she said, and rouge touched her white cheeks.

Without another word, Mephisto climbed onto the boat behind the girl.

The boat didn't seem to have any kind of engine. Oars sculled the water on either side of him. They weren't being pulled by the girl. The oars were attached to metal spheres on each side of the boat. The holes in the spheres were tapered and thus allowed a degree of play.

"Let us depart."

The girl spoke, and the oars creaked. More ancient high technology. The metal spheres on the gunwales rotated slowly. The motion transmitted by this miraculous process moved the oars through the water with strong strokes.

The boat sailed into a wide waterway. Strangely shaped rocks hung like haunting ghosts over the banks. The shores of the waterway, hardly the width of a man's shoulders, were crowded with stands of bamboo.

Standing on the bluffs looking down on them was a four-footed creature. A wolf or the legendary white tiger.

"Is there nothing here you are curious about?" the girl said.

“What would you have me be curious about?”

“I do not know. You must ask me.”

“How far to our destination?”

“I do not know.” The silence went on for a while. “Is there nothing here you wish to look at?” the girl said.

“What would you have me look at?”

“The sky. The sun. The clouds scurrying along. The bamboo forest hugging the shore. The tiger on the bluff. And yet you look only at the water.”

“My patients need nothing but water. This is from whence they came, and to where they shall return. It is worth pondering why people are made of water.”

“*Kiii*—” the oars sang out.

A hundred yards in front of them, the surrounding banks and bluffs narrowed sharply.

Just above the water’s edge was an arc of black oval holes. There were so many of them and they were so closely spaced together that they looked like a fat black line. As soon as the scraping sound of the oars reached the holes, white rope-like things wriggled out and fell down into the river. The white ropes didn’t sink. They swam vigorously, cutting undulating lines through the water.

They weren’t ropes. They were serpents. The eyes of the snow-white serpents sparkled like spots of fresh blood. Flicking their fiery tongues, they made for the boat. The scene wouldn’t simply have

startled a normal person with normal sensibilities—it would have scared him spitless.

"If you wish to go to where my mistress abides, you must travel *inside* them. Have you any objections?" the girl asked curiously.

The mask of Mephisto's face was as blank as it was beautiful. When the serpents had drawn within thirty yards of the boat, he stretched out his hands to the right and left. Metallic reflections shone in the girl's eyes. In Mephisto's pale hand was a coil of wire.

He pushed out a six-inch length with his thumb and pressed his nail into the base. The wire tore like masking tape and dropped over the side of the boat. On contact with the water, the wire looped around itself forming a coil of rings.

Either due to the nature of the materials or the wizardry in the Demon Physician's fingers, those thin coils serpentined through the water like snakes. Under their own power, they aimed themselves at the onrushing serpents and darted forward.

By the time Mephisto dropped the last length of wire into the water, the serpents were ten yards away. The torsos of the serpents were as big as tree trunks. Their dreadful eyes peered down at Mephisto, full of hunger, greed and madness.

The serpents raised their sickle-shaped necks and formed a towering white wall across the narrow river.

The girl's expression didn't change. Neither did any human emotions so much as dent Mephisto's beautiful visage.

Five yards.

The wind and clouds in the eternally blue sky reflected across the water's surface. The serpents flicked their forked tongues. Their blazing red mouths gaped wide. They were poised to attack from three directions, with Mephisto caught in the middle of the trap.

At that moment, the heads of the serpents reared back and chasmed open to the sky. Narrow fissures appeared right below their open jaws. And deepened.

The scaled creatures beat their bodies against the water and plunged under the waves. The boat bobbed like a cork in a whirlpool. Yet through it all, the oars left pairs of wakes in the water and the boat proceeded on course.

The wet and writhing and glistening serpents twining themselves into tangled knots created a scene of utter insanity. And yet the boat sailed on in a sea of calm.

The black water chummed with red. Each time the serpents plunged their heads into the water, the color grew darker. Blood oozed from the fissures in their jaws.

The wire rings. The small rings that Mephisto had shaped with his thumb coiled around the serpents' necks like tiny metal pythons, tightening with unbelievable strength.

A spray of water from the spasms of their death throes caught the girl in the face. Not a drop fell on Mephisto, though he didn't move so much as an inch. Such was to be expected of the Demon City Physician. Even water feared marring that beautiful countenance.

A sound that hit the gut more than the eardrums pounded against

the roof of heaven. A bone-breaking sound. The screams of those giant serpents.

The severed heads splashed down, raising columns of water and foaming whitecaps of red. The glimmering scales and flailing torsos followed, turning the river into a roiling lake of blood.

The roaring waves tossed the little boat around like a toy. Mephisto calmly stood there, eyes ahead, oblivious to the serpents and their death throes. Like a doctor waiting upon the expected reaction to a prescribed drug.

No matter what world he was in, he was always Doctor Mephisto, the Demon City Physician.

The cruelly frothing waves and hideous echoes faded into the distance. In time, they disappeared completely from the senses. The bamboo groves to the right and left grew denser and greener. The wind whistling through the leaves sang a funeral dirge.

“You are a formidable person,” said the girl.

“How much further?” Mephisto asked.

“I do not know. First on the list of things that do not belong here is time itself.”

“Then shall we continue sailing down this river forever?”

“Would that not be a fate most fitting for yourself? You would regret much if you never returned, but there would be, in turn, so many joys and more. In any case, here is where we must part company.”

“I fear I would be lost without my pilot and guide.”

“I was to remain with you only as far as the castle road.” She pressed her hands to her temples. “My duty is to accompany you no further. You may continue on alone.”

As Mephisto watched, the girl pulled her head straight off of her neck. It made a sound like popping the top off a cardboard tube. She held up her head. “I am a little worn out. If we continued on like this, I would undoubtedly become your slave.”

“I appreciate your being my guide.”

The head hovering over the headless neck laughed sadly. It glittered momentarily in the sunlight, drawing a glowing trail in the air as it fell into the water.

Mephisto paid no attention to the small splash, nor to the hard thud of the torso striking the bottom of the boat. Not because another enemy had popped up on his radar. Above and beyond

seeking a way out, it simply did not engage his interest.

The water turned red.

Observing that the boat was in the center of the spreading stain, Mephisto looked down at the girl's torso. Water gushed from the gaping round hole where her head used to be, water of the same crimson color. Probably her "blood."

The arms lying there in the bottom of the boat, drained of life, lacked the fullness the girl's had possessed. The sunlight shone off the hard, ceramic skin. She was a doll.

Steady as a ticking clock, the boat slipped across the bloody surface. Time passed. A band of light on either side of the river caught Mephisto's attention. The glimmer of a rainbow.

A waterfall.

The mist engulfed him. The spray condensed in rosy pearls on the boat's gunwales and on Mephisto's white cape. The breeze brushing his cheeks died. The boat came to a halt. The water poured swiftly over the waterfall toward the new battlefield. A white mass bobbed along in the currents.

Mephisto's sharp eyes identified it as the body of a naked woman. It disappeared momentarily into the mist. Not just one. More came tumbling over the watery cliff. There were now more than ten around him.

The bodies were dragged down in the whirlpool, and then floated to the surface face down.

Abruptly the bodies raised up their heads. Water streamed down their faces. Every manner of salaciousness and wickedness was etched on their voluptuous features, like something out of a bad dream.

Pushing themselves up with their arms—as if the surface of the water was hard as ice beneath their palms—the women came to their feet. Red rivulets slid across their bountiful breasts and dyed the dark hair between their legs. Theirs was the beauty of hell that never saw the true light of day.

"What do you think of us?" asked one woman, pushing out her abundant breasts. "We are not your pilots or guides. She's dead. Give us your blood and your life."

"Your journey ends here," said another.

"The boat is dead in the water. There is nowhere else it can go."

"Stay here with us forever."

"We come for those men who live on the surface of the water. Look!"

The women directed their gaze to where a great logjam of ships barricaded the narrow river. Here a bow jutted out of the water. There another floated just at the water line, the hull cracked and covered with moss. Something white dangled over the sides. The bleached bones of a man's arm and skull. The empty black holes of the eye sockets stared back at Mephisto.

"You are not the only one who has sought our mistress. But you are the most handsome."

The woman who spoke had an aura of almost frighteningly raw sensuality. Her voice was laced with danger.

"In four thousand years, some one hundred men have sailed this river. Scholars and poets, warriors and warlocks. Alchemists who drove away the serpents with their strange concoctions. Huge ships stocked with slaves that were fed to the serpents. And so they made it this far. They all had the same goal—to drive a stake through our mistress's heart. Why have you come here?"

Her eyes, colored with fierce hatred and deep derision, suddenly softened. A change wrought only by the kind of passions a woman can hold for a man.

Mephisto's eyes in response were gentle but firm. "Where is your mistress?" he asked dispassionately.

"I don't know. And even if I did, it is a place well beyond your reach. Better you spend eternity with us along this bend of an unflowing river. We will give you everything a man could possibly need."

The woman who had spoken first cupped her breasts and lifted them up. The nipples grew erect. A white substance arced through the air onto the floor of the boat.

"Milk for you to drink. Flesh you may take from any of our bodies as much as you like. And we will pleasure you the way a man should be pleasured, night after night after night."

They laughed merrily. Their laughter alone would unleash all the desires that resided between the legs of any man.

And just as suddenly stopped. An unexpected look of fear rose to their faces. The women stood like statues on the water's surface. In their black eyes reflected the most beautiful face in the world, brimming with laughter.

This was the smile of Doctor Mephisto, that bespoke the good doctor's opinion of the "fairer sex." Beneath the sunlight and the rainbow and the showering mist, the women turned the color of corpses.

"You will pleasure a man? Perhaps you could start by demonstrating what such a thing might consist of?"

A hand emerged from his cape, more comely and delicate than anything the women had to offer. The hand beckoned to them. Like marionettes dangling from strings, the naked women tottered towards the boat.

"Show me these pleasures of which you speak."

The actions of the women that followed seemed to be responding less to the challenge than to the instructions they were being given.

Arms reached out from all sides. Not to Mephisto, but to the gunwales of the boat. They began rocking the boat, not with great gusto, but rather with a solemn sort of ritual devotion. Lurching starboard and port, aft and stern, the boat bucked atop the outflowing but unmoving ripples in the water.

As to the effect on Doctor Mephisto—there was none.

After several minutes, the women released their hold on the boat. The pitch of his voice unchanged in the slightest, Mephisto

observed, “Rocking the boat right and left generates an excessively stimulating series of sexual impulses. Orgasm would be achieved in less than five seconds. The back and forth motion causes the spent sexual organs to replenish themselves. The pleasures thus produced would literally be endless.”

“It has no effect?” one woman asked in despair. “No one has passed through our watery pleasures. What manner of man are you?”

“No man denies himself pleasure.” Mephisto spoke like a professor lecturing a student. “However, a woman’s pleasures alone will never truly satisfy. Even in four thousand years of Chinese history, error has on occasion been mistaken for truth.”

“We do not understand. Why—”

“I do not know how long you have lived here. But a little ignorance now and then will hardly hurt.” A bright sound rang out from his right hand. The women watched as a wire ring dangled from his fingers. “At the very least, spending eternity talking about Doctor Mephisto’s handiwork will do you no harm.”

He looked past the women to the fortress of ships and dead men, and noted that they were fading away. The perpetual sky at the far end of the river was gone as well. Groves of bamboo sprouting from the black earth lined the water’s edge. The roof of a large manor was visible further in.

“*Ohh*—” the women exclaimed together.

Mephisto’s boat again moved forward on the steadfast surface of the water with all the jauntiness of a pleasure cruise. The eyes of the

women seeing him off were filled with hatred. However, as the white figure drew further away—not once looking back—and became little more than a dot on the horizon, from their mouths issued a long sigh.

Like bidding goodbye to a lover departing on a long voyage, it was a sigh filled with painful might-have-beens.

Beyond the prow of the boat, a wooden wharf jutting out from the shore came into view. The two figures standing there gazed back at him. Mephisto recognized both of them.

Kikiou was wearing silver priest's robes. Next to him, Shuuran's hair fluttered in the breeze. As the water pushed the boat precisely to the dock, the two of them bowed respectfully.

"As soon as Shuuran gave me word, I came here to wait for you. Such was to be expected of Doctor Mephisto. Ah, I see you've arrived here without so much as a scratch."

Gone was the battle-strength *qi* Mephisto had experienced outside the Toyama housing project. In its place was a humble, even courteous, air. But Mephisto regarded the old man with the same look as always.

"This is an unexpected welcome. I would have thought a hungry wolf or famished tiger awaited me."

"Such stereotypical expectations," the old man scoffed. He quickly corrected his expression. "We welcome you from the bottom of our hearts. To speak with total candor, making the best doctor in Demon City into an enemy was the last thing on our minds. I hope

you will reciprocate our warm regards."

"But of course," Doctor Mephisto answered.

"Please, this way." Shuuran smiled and turned towards a narrow path winding through the bamboo grove.

The thick scent of bamboo floated on the breeze. At the back of the grove, a stone staircase was cut into the cliff wall. It had well over a hundred steps.

Shuuran, in the lead, stopped before the staircase. Mephisto asked, "You're not going up?"

"These were originally the steps used by the castle guards. My mistress would rebuke me severely if guests were made to use them."

Kikiou raised his hand. In a flash, another silhouette swallowed up the three shadows cast on the ground. Unquestionably the result of good training, a large bird swooped down and seized Mephisto by the shoulders without a single flapping sound.

Just as it seemed that the bird's upwards trajectory would continue into the heavens, Mephisto found himself standing on the top of the cliff along with the other two. He looked up, but saw no sign of the bird. All he could conclude was that it had at least three legs and three sets of claws.

The wind bore an indescribable fragrance towards him, accompanied by a clear, transparent tone. Stretching out below him was a large courtyard and stately manor. A small red boat and gazebo floated on a brimming lake. A waterfall tumbled solemnly from the summit of an ornamental mountain made of oddly shaped rocks.

The manor house was a showpiece of exquisite craftsmanship, sporting the lavish use of the finest materials. In the heart of an unexplored mountain range, wizards had created this world apart, this ultimate expression of four thousand years of refined tastes.

Beyond the manor was a green expanse, so deep and dark it was almost black, reaching out as far as the eye could see.

This was the dwelling place of these night visitors.

Chapter Three

The woman easily broke through the heralded defensive perimeters of Doctor Mephisto's hospital and continued on her way. The force fields resisted her as they might a gentle breeze. The paralyzers and airlocks filled with anesthetic gas were equally ineffective.

She walked—*flew* might be the better word—right through them.

The computers pointed to the existence of something unconstrained by the basic laws of physics and nature. But thanks to the fleeing woman's horrible beauty, at least one member of the security detail had come away convinced of it.

Getting word that she was moving quickly toward the roof, the surveillance room supervisor figured they had her cornered and tasted victory, though that feeling was tinged with apprehension.

The hospital had seven floors above ground. After that the roof and the infinite sky.

For no logical reason, the supervisor got the feeling that the woman—invisible to his monitors—would deliberately choose the most difficult escape route.

Halfway up the staircase to the roof, the door came into view. The woman stopped. She'd definitely just passed the halfway point. But the distance to the door and its perceived size hadn't changed. She could climb a thousand more steps and wouldn't rise a foot higher.

She could climb forever and all that awaited her was pointless effort.

"So they bent space back on itself. How very clever." The woman smiled, showing her teeth. "But I battled such an obstacle four thousand years ago. With every passing year, humans devolve more than they evolve."

At that time the legendary Yellow Emperor – the ancestor of the Han Chinese – possessed great spiritual powers. He studied the laws of the earthly and incorporeal realms, and freely ordered about the demon gods that resided there. He conquered foreign lands and peoples, and subjugated the Hmong.

Chi You, King of the Hmong, was an expert in magic and the dark arts. He summoned a demon cat beast a hundred feet tall and sent it to devour the Yellow Emperor's armies.

Drawing on the powers of the gods, the Yellow Emperor transformed two talismans into a phoenix and a divine tortoise. These two brought the demon beast under control while the Yellow Emperor employed *Dun Jia* techniques—the most benign school of which would later become known as Feng Shui—to warp space and cut off the enemy's path of retreat.

He constructed three gates around the battlefield. Those thrust into the "Rest" gate were bound hand and foot. Those who plunged through the "Pain" gate were drawn and quartered. And then through the remaining "Life" gate, the demon gods summoned by the Yellow Emperor attacked the distant Chi You.

This warping and bridging of space suggested similar *Dun Jia* techniques. Modern science had only *now* figured out how to bend

space-time? Hence the woman's contemptuous attitude.

"I understand what you can do. But do you understand what *I* can do?"

She bit down hard on the tip of her right index finger. Before the thread of falling blood touched the ground, she flicked her hand. The thread leapt up, its end landing unbroken on the top step. She pulled back with her hand.

Guided by the thread of blood, it seemed that the steel door itself would descend the entire staircase. But that wasn't possible. Rather, a duplicate set of stone steps appeared. The one ran over the other, and when they were perfectly lined up, the door was right before her eyes.

"Over those next thousand years, Taoist monks spent their entire lives figuring out ways to break through the *Dun Jia*. I imagine your scientists will need that much time as well."

She put her hand on the real doorknob of the real door. It opened without further resistance. She stepped onto the roof of Mephisto Hospital, into the dark night air. The breeze caressed her cheeks. The stars shone overhead. She looked up at the sky with an expression that suggested a familiarity with the constellations.

For a moment, lost in her thoughts, a peaceful look eclipsed her ravaged face, as she remembered someone or something from long ago.

"Surrender!" ordered a cold, metallic voice in the darkness. "Or else, according to Safety Preservation Regulation 48 governing this

institution, we will have no choice but to launch a decisive assault."

The woman didn't move. She didn't turn around. There were no human shadows on the roof. It was lit only in the glow of the moon and stars, and yet she could sense a countless number of *things* crawling about.

“Well, well. I would love to stick around and keep you company, but I have overstayed my welcome. So this is goodbye. More people than myself are presently in dire need of this hospital’s services.”

The cheerful tone in the voice wavered just a bit. The white shadow leapt over the railing and was engulfed by a cloud of writhing masses.

Impervious to all known armaments, these synthetic wraiths possessed, weakened and killed any living organism. Only members of the hospital board were authorized by Doctor Mephisto to deploy them.

With a wave of her hands, the wraiths shattered into a thousand pieces.

By the time the flabbergasted security personnel poured onto the roof, the woman was floating through the air. She was then as high above the ground as the fence surrounding the hospital, so they thought she was about to hit the ground.

But then her body moved.

The armored exoskeletons had enough shock-absorbing ability and retro-rocket thrust to take a dive off a fifty-story building. But nobody took off after her. This flesh and blood woman wasn’t a ghost, and yet she skipped through the air as if strolling across level ground.

This was something they’d never seen before. Even in Demon City.

The wind fluttered through the gossamer material on the back of her dress. It reminded them of ephemeral butterfly wings. But they couldn't begin to imagine what it actually was or what it actually did.

Assured that nobody was following her, in a great display of self-confidence, the woman calmly continued on for another ten yards before she picked up the pace and was swallowed up by the Demon City night.

Shuuran indicated the suspension bridge ahead of them. "This way."

The bridge sloped down to the second floor of the manor house. There wasn't any wind. After crossing the bridge with the occasional unsteady step, Mephisto passed through a brightly-colored corridor and was led to what looked like a luxurious living room.

Shuuran handed Kikiou a golden decanter. Kikiou asked casually, as he filled Mephisto's glass, "I assume you drink?"

"Please."

He filled the glass to the brim with the clear, strongly aromatic liquid. Mephisto downed it in a single gulp.

"Splendid!" said the old man, with complete sincerity. "I have to sip at the stuff, and even then it burns my throat. Well, such is to be expected from a citizen of Demon City."

"When did you learn about our little town?"

"While sequestered within the ship."

“And how much do you know?”

“As far as you are concerned, everything.”

A single glance from Mephisto made Kikiou’s meaningful expression stiffen. Mephisto said, “I believe you are mistaken.”

A bead of sweat slid down the center of Kikiou’s forehead, down to the tip of his nose, where he wiped it off. “You are correct.” The old man’s voice sounded like it was tangled up in his throat. “I never sweated like this before. I seem to be running hot and cold these days. As you say, I was mistaken.”

“That is fine,” Mephisto said, as if it didn’t matter to him one way or the other.

Kikiou didn’t reply right away. Then presently, “And how much do you know about us, Doctor?”

Mephisto didn’t hesitate. “You are neither friends nor allies.” “I certainly wouldn’t object to us becoming either. Otherwise there would be no purpose to our inviting you here.”

“One of you attacked my hospital. The only satisfactory penalty for such an offense is death. In this case, he who ordered it and he who did nothing to stop it share the same sin.”

“So you will slay us and be on your way?”

“Regardless of what happens henceforth, I am not interested in anything but the recuperation of my patients.”

A violent demon *qi* erupted from Kikiou’s body and filled the room. “So you are resolved to defeating us no matter what?”

“That is why I am here.”

“We are the ones who invited you.”

“You were not doing me any favors.”

“Won’t you listen to our side of the story? I assure you, we bear you no enmity. To be perfectly honest, the invasion of your hospital was done without knowledge of your presence there. Otherwise, such reckless action would never have been attempted.”

“All the patient gets from a doctor’s regrets is death.”

“A waste of effort, you mean. But of course. You are the man I imagined you to be.”

“I shall take that as a compliment.”

“To tell the truth, what we would be proud to offer you is but a trifle. But that’s why they call you the Demon City Physician. Even if it is but a trifle, why not spare a few minutes to talk it over?”

Kikiou looked quietly into Mephisto’s eyes. Time passed as it had before, though of a far more severe nature.

Mephisto said, “Let’s hear it then.”

Kikiou nodded. “No man can avoid a visit from the Grim Reaper. But when death comes to the door, he needn’t let it in.”

“Eternal youth and eternal life is the privilege of the vampire. But in any case, I could have gathered as much from the Toyama residents. Those humans who wish to associate with them are surprisingly ill-informed about how they actually live.”

Mephisto's observation went right to the heart of the matter, the blind spot in the old legends. Those whose blood was consumed by a vampire would, after death, transform into vampires. This was an inviolable rule. But interviews with the handful of "protégés" that had joined the Toyama clans brought into focus the severe nature of the environment they had consigned themselves to.

They tasted—as mortals—the severe cold and hunger that wracked the vampire's body. But this was a cursed life that knew no end. Breathing frozen breath and enduring a kind of hunger that made them want to devour their own flesh, their lives became a never-ending act of penance.

As a consequence, desperate for warm blood, with natures more ferocious and brutal than the lords of the night, they were loathed not only by humans but by any demonic monster born of a mother. The world of the vampire was not one human beings easily accommodated themselves to.

"I understand what you are saying," countered Kikiou. "But a studied ignorance lies at the heart of such tragedies. You are different. As far as we know, Doctor Mephisto is the only person in Demon City capable of understanding the supernatural realms with his heart as well as his mind."

"And what manner of understanding would that constitute?"

All expression disappeared from Kikiou's face. "Then you are curious?"

"While I do not consider myself an easy man to flatter—"

“I am well aware of that. Doctor Mephisto is ordinarily moved only by what will benefit his patients.” Kikiou gestured to Shuuran, who was standing behind him. The attractive girl nodded, and left the room.

“—I have no intention of becoming one of your brood,” Mephisto continued.

“Neither does that come as a surprise. We have not frittered away the past four thousand years for nothing. We have ways of allowing *special* persons to *not* become one of our brood, while partaking of the privileges accorded those who do.”

Anticipating what effect his words would have on the handsome doctor, the smile did not vanish from Kikiou’s face.

“The person who visited my hospital should be around here somewhere.”

“What?” Kikiou blurted at this incongruous statement. He gaped a bit.

“I was wondering if I could see him. I assume he is the same man who visited the ward mayor’s office this afternoon with you. The most powerful wizardess in Shinjuku has been confined to a hospital bed. Would that be your doing or his?”

“That was my work alone.”

“So the man who fought us in broad daylight could only invade the ward mayor’s office shrouded in darkness?”

Kikiou bowed low. “I’ve got to hand it to you.” At the bottom of

the bow, out of Mephisto's line of sight, his lips twisted into the shape of a smile. Lifting his head he said, "You may already be familiar with the man's name, but his name is Ryuuki. What do you intend to do with him?"

"He must perish. For violating the sanctity of my hospital and acting unlawfully in the ward government building. Though, frankly, I do not care about the latter."

"If that is the price for accepting our good faith intentions in this regard, then so be it. However, that man is the object of our mistress's affections. We could not offer him up to you on the spur of the moment. And besides—" Kikiou paused for a moment. "He happens not to be in."

"Where is he?"

Kikiou didn't answer.

"Where did he go?" Mephisto pressed.

"He indicated that he wanted to settle things with the man who took his fingers. A *senbei* shop owner in West Shinjuku."

"When will he return?"

"Before the break of day. By the looks of things, another hour or so."

"I hope he makes it back in one piece."

"You certainly have a lot of confidence in him. Is Setsura Aki that impressive a fellow?"

"Your investigations do seem to have come up a bit short."

The old man might have taken the look that passed across Mephisto's face for a smirk, but he didn't want to think about it too hard.

A little while later, Shuuran entered the room like she was floating in on a breeze, carrying a silver platter. Neatly arranged on the platter was a porcelain jar that looked like a squat section of water pipe. A single glass tube jutted from it in the shape of a gooseneck. The end was bent into a mouthpiece.

Shuuran set the jar down in the middle of the round table and looked at Mephisto.

"Please, drink," Kikiou urged him. "I swear that its contents were not prepared by any of us. A scholar who desired to know what *we* know without becoming one of us spent thirty years in a little hut out in the middle of nowhere devoted to its creation. After accomplishing his goal, a single mouthful was enough to drive him mad and send him to the grave. But on his deathbed, he communicated a single portion of that knowledge to his apprentice. In time, the apprentice came to the Land of the Gods—to Japan—and there had a child by a local woman. These are the origins of the legend of *Yaobikuni*."

Yaobikuni was the priestess who ate the flesh of a mermaid and lived for eight hundred years. Who could say how many such Chinese legends and fairy tales sprang from the single seed of the single fruit of a single scholar's thirty years of effort?

"The jar and its contents are as they were back then. Aside from the portion consumed by that scholar, not a drop has evaporated. It's

almost as if, for four thousand years, this secret elixir has been waiting for you."

Kikiou pressed both hands down on the jar. When he released his hands, the jar slid across the table toward Mephisto. The most beautiful hand in the world grasped the slender neck.

In the midst of white sunlight that had never known the shade, Kikiou said in an emotional voice, "As I expected, Doctor Mephisto. I pray that it is a vintage most pleasing to your palate."

The lips that a thousand women lusted after pressed against the narrow spout.

Just then, a gust of wind blew down the hallway, buffeting the air in the room. Kikiou turned to the one-armed man standing silently in the doorway and smiled broadly.

"Ah, just in time. We have a guest."

Chapter Four

"I believe you two have met," Kikiou said. "This is Doctor Mephisto." Having introduced the seated doctor, he asked Ryuuki, "What happened to your hand? I can't imagine you losing it to a mere weapon. As the doctor said, Setsura Aki's skills cannot be underestimated."

Ryuuki didn't answer at once. He fixed Mephisto in his sights with eyes that glimmered like black obsidian. "Is Sir Kikiou the one who invited that man in here?"

He received no answer.

"I recall Sir Kikiou stating that he must be destroyed."

"I did extend the invitation, but it was Shuuran who took advantage of the circumstances."

"Really?" His eyes were like a pair of deep mineshafts.

The pretty girl nodded. "I became concerned about the man I was supposed to finish off. He should have had his throat cut, but all at once I wasn't so sure and went outside to make certain."

"You'll be punished for that."

"I know." The girl paled and bowed.

Ryuuki grabbed her throat with his black arm. Not giving her time to moan, he embraced her, and pressed his lips against her white throat. Mephisto caught the brief glimmer of his sharp fangs.

"*Ahh—ahh—*"

She bowed her head back in ecstasy. Two trails of fresh blood trickled down her skin. Ryuuki's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He was drinking her blood. The blood of his colleague.

"Losing an arm and famished to boot," Kikiou said in a hard, cold voice. "You really blundered badly."

Mephisto had nothing to add to that.

"You are correct." Ryuuki shoved the waxy-pale Shuuran into a nearby chair and wiped his mouth. "The same goes for you."

"I know."

Mephisto quietly asked, "And how is Setsura Aki?"

Ryuuki's black eyes—that a moment before had been brimming with death—shone with a deeper sense of "humanity" than anybody else's in the room.

"A friend?" he asked.

"I fancy myself so."

"He broke my *qi*. But still got hit by a good half of it. He should be in your hospital by now."

"You returned at exactly the right time." As the three vampires watched, the white figure came to his feet. "I must be on my way. But not before ridding the world of you."

Sitting in the chair, Shuuran opened her eyes and glared at him. Crossing her line of vision, a black hand moved—almost as in slow

motion—towards Mephisto's chest, pushing outwards with the palm.

The devastating *qi* that had sent Setsura Aki to the hospital and Galeen Nuvenberg to the brink of death. That *something* shot through the air, striking the glittering cape with a slanting blow and splintering apart.

At the same time, a similar force broke like a wave against his upper arm. "Oh, so you can do it too," came Ryuuki's voice, observing a *qi* similar to his own radiating from Mephisto's hand.

"Well, monkey see, monkey do." A small wave of sound came to life beneath the right-hand side of Doctor Mephisto's cape and circled his waist.

"That was my iron *qi*," Ryuuki explained, planting his left foot behind him. "Next comes my penetrator *qi*. It's what brought down Setsura and that decrepit witch at the government building. That cape of yours might as well be made of tissue paper—"

He left his words hanging in the air. Ryuuki leaped to the left. A sharp sound rent the air where he had just been, like the cracking of a whip. Invisible bands of power stretched between the man landing on his feet and the man standing there stock still.

The cape fluttered, and Doctor Mephisto collapsed. A moment later it became apparent that his "body" was a wire mannequin.

"You're fast."

The voice came from where Ryuuki had been standing. He pivoted and stretched out his left hand. The beautiful man again crumpled to the ground. And changed into a jumble of wires.

“Your technique certainly is deadly, but not if it can’t hit anything.”

Ryuuki didn’t turn toward the whisper directly behind him.

“If a patient of mine cannot settle down when I’m not around, I use a stand-in. It is helpful when I am late for important dates. But it is only useful for deceiving the eyes of ordinary humans.”

Imbuing a wire mannequin with the illusion of his real self wasn’t much of a stretch for Doctor Mephisto. But on the battlefield it proved quite effective. Multiple Mephistos confronted them from the middle of the living room, next to the window, in the doorway. Kikiou and Shuuran looked on dumbfounded.

Within this devilish hall of mirrors, a strong voice—tinged with rust—answered, “Exactly. For ordinary humans.”

All the Mephistos narrowed their eyes.

Ryuuki closed his. He extended his hand. Toward the Mephisto standing in front of the couch facing the door.

The white figure staggered. All the other “Mephistos” vanished. But the surprised gasp was Ryuuki’s. His penetrator *qi* could split a boulder in two and bring down a rampaging tiger. And yet in the face of such black arts, Mephisto just stood there. At most, a small bead of sweat gathered on his forehead.

Ryuuki’s attention was instead concentrated on his left hand. Four fingers remained. A strand of wire wrapped around his wrist also entwined his thumb and the rest of his pinky above the second knuckle, holding it tightly against his palm.

“The power in your hand resides in those two fingers. The more proficient the user, the more important they become.” Mephisto spoke in a subdued tone of voice.

“You haven’t suddenly mastered the art of *qigong* breath control, have you?”

Mephisto shook his head. “A little. A very effective technique. But I was expecting a single and deciding coup de grâce.”

Again Ryuuki extended the arm of death. Except that it came to a halt at a forty-five degree angle with his body. The silvery wire binding his wrist to his waist wasn’t there a split second before. Even he hadn’t known it’d been from the time he’d first jumped out of the way, dodging the wire that split the wind like a whip.

His left hand was immobilized. And if he tore it off, he had no right hand to fall back on. But before he could act in any case, he felt a sharp pain around his waist. His body was bowed backwards.

“You might not have noticed, but the wire is wrapped around your torso. Not as cleanly as Setsura Aki could do, but enough to cut you in half.”

“Not before my penetrator *qi* gets you.” Ryuuki’s face grayed and his voice pitched up half an octave. “You took that *qi* on purpose—”

“A diagnosis is impossible without a thorough knowledge of the disease,” Mephisto said, wiping his forehead. “And there is no better way of discerning the nature of a disease than by contracting it yourself. But I may have overdone it a bit.”

The cape fluttered. Ryuuki groaned and fell back against the

wall. His purple lips parted and he panted like a dog.

"I'd prefer that you repent for the harm done to the people of this city in another world."

Mephisto was about to yank back on the wire with his left hand when his body grew stiff. The loop of wire fell to the floor with a pleasant ringing sound.

"It finally took hold," Shuuran said, her icy words filled with hatred. "The drug took that long to kick in. He really is a formidable man."

Ryuuki dropped to the floor with a thump. Kikiou and Shuuran kept their eyes fixed on the white-shrouded doctor. Shuuran stepped toward him. This time, the Demon Physician was as helpless as a baby.

But before Kikiou's hand reached out to intercede, Mephisto came to his senses. Silence filled the white room.

"How was it?" Kikiou asked. His voice seemed to be coming from far away.

Mephisto's answer was short and to the point. "I saw."

"And?"

"First I have to dispose of this man." Mephisto leaned over and picked up the coil of wire.

"What is the nature of this obsession?" Kikiou wondered curiously.

Mephisto didn't answer. He settled into a stance, about to yank

back with his right hand, when—

The room wavered back and forth.

"What? Now?"

Kikiou goggled. Shuuran stared in blank amazement at the ceiling. Mephisto looked out the window. The world outside was still as death. And yet they knew that everything in eyesight was coming unglued from their moorings.

The world was on the move. A sudden sense of vertigo gripped Mephisto. Everything was suddenly far away and he was sucked down into the blackness. Further and further away, Kikiou and Shuuran floated on the rumbling, seething dark.

He heard only their voices. "We must be on our way. We will meet again at some later date. We'll be looking forward to your answer then."

The two of them remained distinct as the darkness swallowed them up, down to the lines on their faces. Simultaneously Mephisto's consciousness was engulfed by the infinite night.

"Doctor!" someone shouted close by.

Yakou was standing there. Behind him was a mountain of rubble. The rubble took on a hazy blue glow, night yielding its temporary hegemony to the day.

This place, Mephisto realized, was where he'd last stepped forward with their kingdom in his sights.

"Where were you? I've been searching high and low." Yakou

couldn't hide the disapproval in his voice.

Mephisto sank to one knee. "What's wrong?" Yakou implored. He was about to lend him his shoulder, when he sensed that this doctor was the one person who wouldn't appreciate such a gesture. He hesitated. "What happened?"

"Oh, this and that."

Mephisto took a thin breath. He felt like warm, soft lead from the neck on down. Ryuuki's penetrator *qi* had caused him no little discomfort.

"Can you stand?"

"More or less." Mephisto drew out his right hand from beneath his cape and looked at it. "You haven't seen a coil of wire around here somewhere?"

"Not at all."

"What a strange world."

Yakou's expression shifted. "Did you break into their stronghold? Where is it?"

"Here," replied Mephisto. He directed his gaze at the nearby mountain of rubble. "I entered *there*, then through a forest, across a river, and then *here*. For all my travels, I traveled all of one foot. What a remarkable kingdom."

He spoke in almost disinterested tones as he got to his feet. He didn't betray the slightest discomfort. Like a fountain of water flowing upward towards the sky. His eyes fell on a man collapsed

against the pile of rocks behind Yakou.

"The man they were after."

Yakou pointed at his neck. "His throat was ripped out and he was swallowing his own blood. He must have been one of their victims. Even with half his neck missing, he managed to keep on living. He put up a fight, so I put him to sleep."

"Good job," Mephisto answered, remembering what Shuuran had said. She'd left their hidden fortress in order to confirm his death—to clean up after herself, not out of any compassion for the human condition.

Glancing down at the man's disheveled, flaccid features, Mephisto added in a small voice, "I wonder if it'd upset anybody if I said he reminded me of Ryuuki?"

"What's that?"

"Let's go. Tonight's hunt has yielded both of us worthy trophies."

Yakou blinked, but said nothing. The white-caped figure passed by him. *What did he see?* he couldn't help asking himself.

But as long as he was working alongside this doctor, he should expect to be whisked away without a second thought to demon-haunted places that even he, a citizen of the supernatural realms, couldn't begin to imagine or understand.

Part Two: Reptile Mansion

Chapter One

Setsura regained consciousness around two o'clock that afternoon. He groggily opened his eyes. "And I was having such a nice dream." He sounded in his own head like an old geezer. His tongue felt like a soggy piece of cardboard.

"They say the worse off the patient, the better the dreams. How are you feeling?" Mephisto posed the kind of question expected of an attending physician.

"Sluggish. I still can't move my hands and legs."

"You should soon be at least as functional as I am."

"You look like crap. How many people have you malpracticed to death anyway?"

"You might want to mean that literally after this. I intend to settle things with that sparring partner of yours once and for all."

"You met?"

"Hardly surprising, I would think," Mephisto said in a blasé tone of voice. "Would you rather we hit it off like kindred spirits?"

"So you didn't kill him?" Setsura asked. He quickly added, "No. I don't know how many aces he's got up his sleeve, but he's not an easy man to kill. Call it a draw. You'll have to fill me in on the details. By the way, what about Miss Kanan? I have the feeling that she accompanied me here."

"She's in the special containment ward."

"She's *where*?" He half sat up, before collapsing back on the bed. "Man, the quality of care here has really hit the skids. I shouldn't be surprised that a visitor ends up turning into a patient."

Mephisto ignored the dig. He pulled up an armchair and sat down next to the bed. Leaving out one particular detail, he recounted the events of the night before. It took a good thirty minutes.

During this time, Setsura made only one comment. "So *that* woman showed up here?" He asked, referring to Takako Kanan, "Is she all right?"

"Unfortunately her blood was taken. I have to ask, but how could this have happened while she was with you? Surely you could protect a single woman—even unconscious. What's going on? Don't worry. Leave her care up to me. You root out the nest of the perpetrator who drank her blood."

Setsura didn't react or say anything until Mephisto had stopped talking.

"There's something else I must ask you as well," Mephisto said. "How did *you* escape that woman? Your devil wire was lying in pieces all over the floor."

"I don't remember," Setsura said simply. He flexed his fingers beneath the blanket. "Still feels like I'm wearing a hundred pounds on each wrist. Time doesn't heal all wounds."

"Your body temperature is eighty degrees. Your pulse is forty. Constant chills. No appetite. As I told you, the same as me."

“Then what am I going through all this for, you quack?”

“Further recuperation is going to have to wait on new information to emerge,” Mephisto coolly declared. “More importantly, the funeral for the Elder is tonight. Do you think you will make it?”

Setsura fell silent for a second. “Him?”

“Who else? The cause of death was getting his heart torn out. Though according to Yakou, the woman was severely burned in the process. The woman who was after you reportedly had half her face burned off. The malice and bitterness has got to be miles deep and getting deeper. I saw it myself. That world of theirs is in motion. Probably because of her. I imagine she ordered it to come pick her up.”

“Hysteria can move the world. Their world may be enclosed within that ship. Where is it headed next?”

“Finding that out is your job.”

Setsura focused his bleary eyes on Mephisto’s face. “What’s on your mind?”

“A patient with nine lives like a cat. In any case, what about the funeral? Yakou is practically mad with fury. There will be blood. Toyama is dispatching their best men to serve as Miss Kanan’s personal bodyguards.”

Setsura pressed his hands against the mattress and slowly raised the upper half of his body. Jerking his chin at the wall opposite, he said, “Stand over there.”

Only one man in Shinjuku could order Doctor Mephisto around like that. And only one man in Shinjuku whose lead Mephisto would follow. His cape appeared to melt into the white wall. The expression on his face was perfectly at peace. But the Demon Physician was no doubt delighted.

Setsura laced his fingers together and pushed out his palms. He winced and shook his head.

"Hey," said Mephisto.

"Relax," Setsura replied cheekily. "I may be a bit under the weather, but if my methods can't be trusted, then it'll be up to you to hold the line."

He shook his hands, warming up. Not the slightest shadow of a doubt clouded his beautiful countenance. Though he couldn't help feeling a bit off his game here and there.

Mephisto's hands remained inside his cape. More than his hands could emerge from there. The rays of the July afternoon sun streamed through the windows like milk pouring into sluggish, warm water, further suffusing the eerie growing vibe.

Setsura abruptly stopped "warming up." A beautiful hand emerged from Mephisto's cape. A sharp *ping* rang out. Something shattered a yard in front of Setsura and in a flash flew apart. For several seconds Setsura didn't move. Then he sighed like a student who failed his entrance exams.

"Should I send for a physical therapist?" asked Mephisto, and not at all glibly.

He'd sent his *qi* flying. Setsura's wires had neatly sliced through it. And yet the two of them looked like their dog died.

"That's the strongest *qi* you've got?" Setsura asked, massaging his shoulders.

"Yes. And you made short work of it."

"That was my best effort. Crank it up a notch and you'd be wiping the floor with me. You should check yourself into the hospital as well. Physician, heal thyself."

"I shall think it over." Mephisto glanced down at his right hand. "In the meantime, has anything we've been discussing given you an inkling about where they've relocated their safe house?"

"No. But it's clear they can warp space and time. Ancient China had an amazingly advanced civilization. They packed their entire world into that little ship and sailed it here."

"I can't say I'm familiar with the origins of that kind of technology or with the phenomena. How about yourself?"

"Ditto," Setsura said in a tired voice. "Sounds like a self-contained universe. Having experienced it yourself, what do you think?"

Mephisto shook his head. "I don't know."

During the Five Dynasties period at the end of the first millennium, one of the merchants who ran the public market became friends with an old apothecary. Every evening the old man vanished into a jar in his shop. The merchant wanted to see what it was like

inside.

The old man gladly invited him in for a look. The merchant found himself in another world, in a room filled with rare furniture. Drinking wine finer than any he'd known back in his world, he looked outside the room. Lakes and forests and mountains filled the earth and sky to the distant horizon. This world was indeed complete in every way.

The merchant recognized the old man as a wizard, and sojourned with him deep in the mountains in order to learn the secrets of his craft. But he was never able to master the dark arts and eventually had to leave. He never saw the old man again.

Hence the origins of the so-called "universe in a bottle."

These four demons came from epochs much older than the sources of such stories. So their ability to employ such secret arts was hardly surprising.

Setsura got out of bed. Mephisto said, "If you intend to leave the hospital, you should at least get an examination first."

"Forget it. It'll be evening soon. That's *their* time. My job is finding out where they are."

"Have any clues about where they are?"

"I would if these were the usual suspects."

Mephisto looked out the window as Setsura pulled off the hospital gown. "So we're going to have more invalids on our hands," he muttered under his breath.

Setsura retrieved his clothing from the sterilization closet. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. He'd never heard Mephisto refer to his patients and cases as anything but. Ryuuki's penetrator *qi* was something else indeed, worming inside the body, casting a shadow over the handsome doctor's vocabulary.

Mephisto took note as well. "Not that *my* caseload will be increasing. This city may be appropriate to their needs, but that doesn't mean they are appropriate to this city. If they aren't eliminated quickly, Shinjuku will be steeped in blood."

"No matter whose blood they drink, they won't become any more talkative. We've got to do something before the mayor flips out and orders the chief of police to launch a vampire hunt. You need to develop the equivalent of a vampire mosquito net, or some kind of blood serum that can counteract being bitten."

"I am working on it. What about the Elder's funeral? He obviously thought highly of you. It should begin at the Toyama housing project soon after sunset."

"I'll see you there."

"Good luck."

Setsura paused at the door and glanced at the window. The one man in this city more attractive than himself stood there motionless, as if projecting his own gloom over the metropolis.

Setsura got in touch with Yoshiko Toya as soon as he got home. He had several sources on retainer, but none of them had anything. One said he should ask Toya. But she didn't have any information at

her fingertips about new Chinese in the city.

The sky grew a deeper shade of blue. Impatience was darkening his own face about the time Toya called him back. “I forgot something,” the heavy voice said. “You asked about anybody familiar with Chinese traditions and legends. There is a man. In Arakimachi.”

“His name?”

“Toujuurou Niwa. Sixty-nine. Professor emeritus at Waseda University. His specialty is ancient Chinese history.”

“Sounds rather run-of-the-mill.”

“And yet you had to ask me.”

This reminder was accompanied by a grunt and a belch. Out of politeness, the telephone connection was always blamed for such noises. But it happened when meeting her in person too. Considering her general girth and physique, the observer was less liable to laugh than to gape.

“Got it,” he said, the dumpling-like face of the information peddler popping up in the back of his mind as he spoke. “So what about him isn’t so run-of-the-mill?”

“Twenty-five years ago, not just his college but the profession as a whole hounded him into an early retirement. The Japanese Historical Society, the Ancient History Research Association, the Federation of Chinese Historical Literature Collections—they all gave him the boot. The guy got himself involved in some real funny business.”

“Like what?”

“That’ll cost you another twenty.”

Toya struck a hard bargain, and did it with a smile on her face. She was fat as a pig and as miserly and hard-nosed as Scrooge. But it wasn’t her extraordinary intelligence-gathering skills—that meant she’d never go begging for work—it was the comical way she waddled around that earned her the title, “Lard of the Dark.”

“Deal.”

“Much appreciated.” A belch.

“No problem.”

“The professor specialized in the underside of ancient Chinese history. Legends, fairy tales, magic. Ghosts and goblins, that sort of stuff. Nothing unusual about that alone. But the goal of his research was to prove that it was all *real*. Though even that’s not so far out there. Except in the middle of one conference, he pulled off a stunt that sent the old-school types right over the edge.”

“Which was?” The darkening world outside the window cast shadows across Setsura’s face.

“Magic,” Toya said breezily. “Sorcery. Before an assembly of dignitaries and blowhards, he gave a demo in the Chinese black arts. They probably thought he’d pull a rabbit out of a hat or something. Not the real damn thing. The conference room erupted in pandemonium. According to the minutes, two people there died of shock.”

“So they kicked him out. Hardly unexpected in the outside world.”

“That’s for sure. A performance like that would win him a standing ovation here.”

“He got a family?”

“He lives by himself. He was married, but his wife died ten years ago. All his kids live in the outside world. And he’s since gone a little nuts.”

“What’s his address?”

She told him, and he thanked her and was about to hang up.

“Hold on a second.” She cut another one.

“Yeah?” He waited but Toya said nothing. “Something you ate disagreed with you?” he joked.

“Mmm. So something happen that you’re not saying?”

“Why would you think that?” It occurred to Setsura that he might be laying on the unflappable attitude a bit thick.

“No idea. The intel I’m seeing and hearing isn’t any different from before. The craziest shit in the world could be right over the horizon and this city just shrugs it off. Frankly, *that’s* what scares the crap out of me.”

“Huh.”

“Still, it’s my job to know everything that’s going down that’s connected to this city. Problem is, that’s the *only* thing I’ve got a

handle on. There's plenty I'm clueless about. What kind of hair gel the guy in the house next door uses? What he eats for breakfast? What's happening on that level is completely off my radar screens. And right now, it's happening everywhere in Shinjuku. You get my point?"

"What *is* your point?" Setsura asked, still in his laid-back tone of voice.

"I'm not so sure myself. Maybe it's because I'm getting more intel than usual. Maybe it's because I'm getting less. Maybe it's because I'm getting reports all telling me the same thing. Maybe it's because the nights are longer and darker than usual. Maybe it's because the days keep getting shorter. Or maybe I'm just beat. The only thing I do know is that I've caught a constant case of the creeps. There's a curse on this place."

"This *is* Demon City."

Toya was quiet for a minute. "Good to hear," she said. "Good to hear. At least you're the same as always. Just as I expected. You're a citizen of Demon City. It's in your bones. When the apocalypse comes, I'm sticking by you."

"Fine with me."

"Helps me sleep at night." Her voice was filled with trust. "I have no idea what's going to happen next, but whatever it is, you'll think of something. Hang in there, okay? *Urp*."

She said goodbye and hung up.

Fifty yards from Aki Senbei was a side street that was always

dank and dark even in the middle of the day. An old man in a long gray robe stood at the back of the street, eyes closed. He held a rusty, dented funnel in his parched right hand. The narrow end was pressed against his ear.

If one in the thousands of passersby on the main thoroughfare had stopped and taken note of the old man's strange behavior—had glanced at the funnel and seen that it was pointed at a small *senbei* shop—what he was up to would still remain a puzzle.

"Three eight Arakimachi—" mumbled the deeply creviced, glistening, leech-like lips. "Once Ryuuki showed he couldn't get the job done, I set out at once. Still, I didn't think Setsura would return home so quickly. My listening device couldn't penetrate the walls of the hospital. It's much more useful here."

Based on the old man's running self-commentary, he'd tailed Setsura from Mephisto Hospital. Contrary to appearances, an evil killer instinct suffused every fiber of this particular senior citizen. For he was none other than Kikiou.

After setting up the new safe house, he'd set out in the middle of the day to bring down their most dangerous enemy, Setsura Aki.

Feeling a presence behind him, Kikiou spun around.

In a deep, dark corner of the street where the sun didn't shine and not even the people who lived there were curious about exploring, two points of light stared back from the inky shadows.

The growl that issued forth was suffused with echoes of hunger. With an eerie smile, Kikiou casually approached this monster—that

was born and grew up in an eternal night.

The listening device had not only intercepted Setsura's voice, but Toya's as well. Now he stashed it inside his robes and reached into a burlap bag dangling from his shoulder. By the time he'd retrieved the object, the ravenous eyes were a mere three feet away.

He tossed the object. To normal eyes, it seemed to melt into the gloom and disappear. It was a small square box a little over an inch square. It emitted a low sound as it fell to the ground.

The two points of light started, and backed up several steps. Kikiou took another object from the bag and transferred it to his mouth.

It was like the thing that Mephisto had put into his mouth at their manor. The mouth of the porcelain jar was capped with a metal ring and lid. A metallic pipe jutted out of the lid.

Kikiou sucked on the short end of the pipe, drawing in his cheeks. And then blew it out. Without a sound, a mist covered the ground between himself and the beast. It formed into the shape of an umbrella about eighteen inches in diameter and fell toward the strange box.

Something quavered in the midst of the impenetrable darkness. An ear-piercing screech rang out. The creaking of a hinge. A wondrous aroma filled the shadows.

The nose-wrinkling smell of a fresh slaughter—not at all appealing to the human senses. The cloud of scent expanded. Less than two seconds later, the pair of eyes changed. The ferocity melted

like snow in summer. Eyes brimming, their owner slowly crawled up to Kikiou. The small box was the only thing between them.

And yet before the fourth footfall, the glowing eyes suddenly disappeared. And then the rest of the creature's body—whose presence suggested it must be quite large—vanished as well. It was as if some large thing had suddenly emerged between the man and the monster and swallowed it whole.

"*Kiii*—" screeched the hinge. With that, every other sound died as well.

Several minutes later, Kikiou emerged from this forgotten little alleyway—avoided even by the residents of the neighborhood. Under the bright sunlight, he examined the little box with an air of satisfaction. He flashed a smile in the direction of Aki Senbei and set off towards Shinjuku Station at a brisk clip.

In this dark alley, abandoned by humans for several years now, a scrambling horde of little shadows greedily devoured the desiccated corpse of the large cat that had appeared there several minutes before.

Chapter Two

An intense, foul mood filled the room, made all the more claustrophobic by the listless purple dusk. The silk pavilion and the statue clothed in leaves of beaten gold created a bright slash across the permanent twilight—that hadn't changed since ancient times.

Everything appeared warped, and wavered as if viewed from the bottom of a deep column of water.

This was the personal quarters of the Demon Princess. Behind the curtains was her pool of blood. The sound of water died away. A thick streak of fresh blood covered the green marble floor from the edge of the pavilion to the golden statue.

The reason for the bronze incense burners lining the wall was obvious—to mask the smell of blood.

The sturdy figure stood in front of the statue. He was naked. No matter how licentious the woman, the beauty of his body alone would captivate her before any sexual passions could be aroused.

It was difficult to imagine soft entrails contained in such a hard body. Peeling back the skin would surely reveal massive muscles attached to a groaning steel frame, a creation of the gods.

This was Ryuuki.

Witnessing the horrible sorrow engraved on his elegant face, instead of asking when or how it came to be there, the onlooker would simply look away. This was the countenance of a man who

spent his whole life trudging across a deserted, desolate, windswept field.

His eyes, wide open, were fixed only on the blue light.

“It won’t get better,” came the woman’s voice at his feet, words rent by fury and violent distress.

Ryuuki didn’t move. A white hand thrust up around his knees. The fingers spread apart and trembled. The sound of her voice—the anger or the hatred—dictated that these trembling fingers must not be touched. The hand pushed out from between the tightly knitted, scale-like gold leaf of the statue.

“Why won’t it return to the way it was? I steep myself in the crimson bath, I secrete myself inside the sarcophagus, but the scars on my face do not heal. My eyes do not see.”

The substance of her speech seemed to reflect only disappointment. But not the tone and tenor. White-hot hate flowed through the blue room. An arm reached up. Then from the ocean of gold came her other arm. Her black hair appeared. With the clear, crisp sound of a cascade of coins, the leaves of gold rained down from her breasts and shoulders. The woman’s naked body rose up.

The cruelly burned half of her face notwithstanding, she truly deserved the title, “Princess.”

Thanks to whatever technology this ancient woven fabric possessed, not one of the golden scales scattering here and there touched the ground. They instead sewed themselves back together and returned to the place where they usually resided.

The woman looked like a mermaid arising from a golden sea. “You know the man who imposed such horrors upon me?”

She fixed the unmoving Ryuuki with her eyes. A curious note of contemplation entered her voice. Ryuuki didn’t answer.

“That bastard is dead. I killed him with these hands. But the wounds will not heal. Ryuuki, my loathing for this city has been reborn. It only grows stronger as the days pass. Kikiou personally intended to make this place our own. And I say, so be it. I do not care who notices or how many enemies we arouse. Just like Shang and Hsia, we will destroy them and leave their carcasses to the hellhounds. First of all, Ryuuki, you must kill Setsura Aki.”

She said this all in a single breath. The woman’s lips turned up. She smiled. A smile no human being was capable of.

“I ordered you to before. But you fucked up again. He may be the one opponent you cannot kill. Though if that were the case, you wouldn’t have the nerve to slink back here. You would die before failing to destroy an enemy. That means the *intention* within you died instead. How is that?”

Her own eyes were torn to shreds, but he felt the icy glare piercing his heart. He said nothing. The melancholy on his face grew heavier, wrapped in grief, appearing before her like a monumental stone sculpture. The muscles and sinews of his naked physique appeared like contour lines in the chiaroscuro shadows.

The white arm snaked around his torso. “You’ve fallen for him, this Setsura Aki.”

Her voice spilled like water from the nape of his neck across his imposing pectoral muscles. His body trembled. She sank her white teeth into the base of his neck. A thin line of blood oozed out. She pressed her lips to his skin and lapped it up.

"It's not that I don't understand. Even for a man, it'd be a rare heart that wasn't touched by that beautiful visage. But I ordered you to kill him. What say you, Ryuuki? Do you refuse?"

At length, the magnificent lips moved. "If that is your command."

"That is my command."

"Then I will do as commanded." His body shuddered again.

She jerked her mouth away from his neck, leaving a half-moon shaped gouge into the dark skin, exposing the pink meat beneath. An eruption of blood filled the divot, forming a bump above the plane of the dermis. She chewed the flesh ripped from his body and swallowed without a moment's hesitation.

"You're lying. I know you intend to die the next time you fight."

"Quite the contrary. I intend to bring Setsura Aki to our side."

"You can do that?"

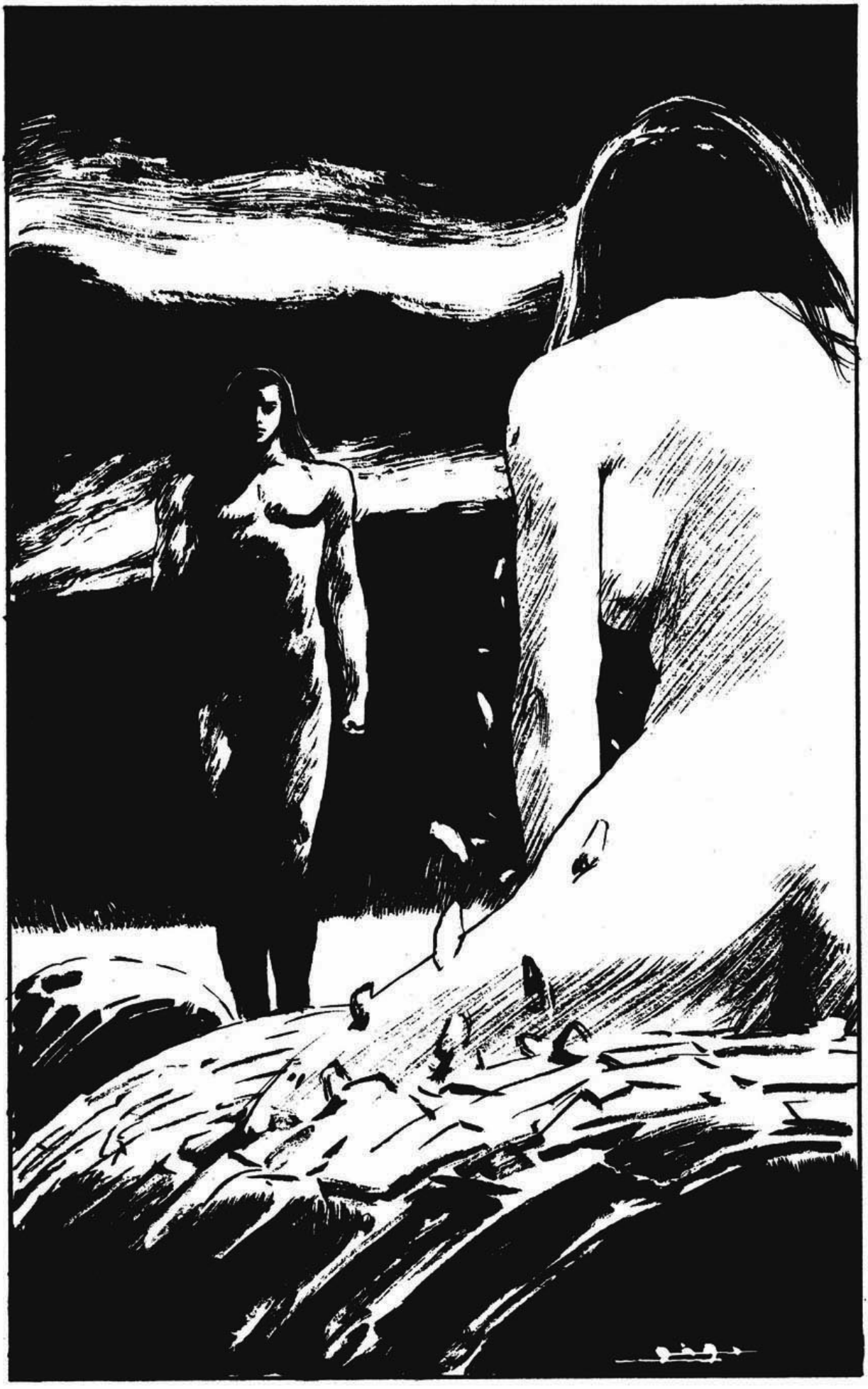
"Definitely."

She circled around in front of him and gazed with her sightless eyes at the remarkable package between his legs. A playful expression touched her haughty face.

"The detestable thing isn't coming to attention. *Arise*."

Their strange master/servant relationship was in effect here as well. Ryuuki's manhood stood up, as if defying the weight of gravity. The stream of blood from his neck trickled down to his thighs. She traced its path with her fingers, smearing it against her palms. And took his towering erection in her hands.

The object behind her hands filled with a feral passion as she massaged him. She released her grip. Panting, she trailed her lips along the length of his bloody cock. Entirely appropriate to her nature, her lips came away painted red.



She pulled back her head and then plunged down on his shaft. For the first time, Ryuuki moaned.

“How often have I enjoyed myself with you thusly? You lose every time, and yet refuse to cast aside your military pride. Can you even imagine prostrating yourself before Setsura?”

She articulated her words clearly and took him deeply into her throat, hot and huge.

“I will never allow it. I’ll never permit you an honorable death as a military commander. Nor anything like it. You already died, and will live your accursed life forever. With me.”

“I know,” Ryuuki said quietly. Befitting the blue room, he didn’t budge an inch.

“It’s fine if you haven’t got what it takes. Accept your just desserts and leave the rest to others. Ryuuki, you’ve seen what lies in the hold of this ship?”

With the force of being struck, the brawny face looked down at her. The woman smiled a satisfied smile. *Ah, yes. The horror. The horror*.

“So you remember what I told you five hundred years ago?” She moaned, nuzzling him with her pale face. The bloody rouge coated her cheeks and nose. “If necessary, I will loose him upon the world. The thought of how not just Setsura—but how this city—would react makes me go all a-quiver inside. To be honest, though, I don’t wish to play that hand. Once more into the breach, Ryuuki. Once more. Kill Setsura.”

“Upon my life.”

“Kikiou is out at the moment. I suspect he’s gone to get rid of Setsura himself. I usually let him have his way. But *you* are the one who must take his life. It is time for you to be on your way.”

“What about Doctor Mephisto?”

“Leave him alone. He might be the only person who can heal this wound. Bring him to me.”

She sucked him hard, drawing in her cheeks. Ryuuki furrowed his brows.

“Come,” she commanded him.

He came. Another command he could not refuse. He filled her mouth. Purring, she drank down the bitter nectar.

Ryuuki exited into the hallway. The light poured down. He was clothed in dark Chinese robes. The wound in his neck had already healed. The scar vanished. Proof that he was indeed a creature of the night.

His hair wafted to the left. The wind. A sound as beautiful as any in the world sang out from his hands. The wind strummed at the strings of the small koto beneath his right hand—the ghost koto *Silent Night* that lured Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto into a dream world.

Ryuuki turned around. The wind toyed with Shuuran’s hair. The green forest and blue-gray mountain peaks hovered in the background. She silently approached him. The lovely girl looked at

him with her big, sad eyes.

"I see you have *Silent Night*. So you are going to see Setsura Aki?"

"Yes."

"I wish to accompany you."

"Your job is to look after Princess. She can get by without me around. But she needs you. She doesn't even know how to cook."

"I have the feeling Sir Kikiou will be cleaning up after you," Shuuran said nonchalantly.

"You think so?"

"I overheard what he and that doctor were talking about. I have listening devices of my own. Your life in exchange for his becoming our ally. Sir Kikiou thought it a fair deal."

"I am not surprised."

"You're not disappointed? For over two thousand years, you have suffered all manner of wounds. You have died in the fires of hell in order to defend us. Those other two may not remember but I will not forget."

He touched the face of the earnest young woman with a swarthy finger. It felt to her like a stone. The skin of the finger had hardened and cracked, the fissures like a spider's web. This was the road that had brought Ryuuki this far.

"If I told you not to be angry, not to grieve, you wouldn't listen. I envy you."

“Why mustn’t I grieve?”

“Because since joining the crew of this ship, I have died and been reincarnated at least a hundred times. That is my role here. Because the real me died once before and that death continues on. What stands before you and Princess is nothing more than a soulless, living corpse. One should not begrudge one’s death.”

“I saw you die,” Shuuran said, covering the strong hand stroking her cheek with her own. “There you stood, the cold, dead winds sweeping across the Wu Zhang Plains, surrounded by heaps of fallen soldiers. Dying, your body pierced by fifty arrows. Your mouth fixed in an unwavering line, your eyes taking in every inch of those desolate fields, prepared to fight when the enemy came again. And if they did not come, you were ready to march to the distant horizon. That’s why Princess chose you. From the start, I wasn’t sure that it was a good idea. You still stare off at those distant, desolate horizons like you are still standing on that windswept plain. That is where you belong.”

“How strange. You know me so well, while I do not know you at all. Where you came from and where you are going. Is Shuuran even your real name? Well, no, the same goes for Princess and Sir Kikiou.”

“Don’t you want to know?”

“The dead lack a curious heart,” he said, turning away. “It is all dust in the wind.”

Shuuran wished to jump onto his broad back and cling to him. “You cannot die, except on the Wu Zhang Plains. You must return.

No, I cannot let you die here. No matter what Princess and Sir Kikiou may say."

"Enough," he said curtly, and continued on down the corridor.

At that moment, the echoes of indescribably coarse laughter arose from the earth. If the legends of a Plutonian underworld that all civilizations shared were true, then this must be what its merciless and brutal guards sounded like as they slithered through its precincts.

After Ryuuki left, Princess donned a gossamer silk gown and faced the wall to the left of the curtains that hid the pool of blood. An iron door suddenly appeared there. The black nails driven into the rusty red surface lent it an ominous aura.

The woman pushed her right index finger into a keyhole-like elliptical crack. Along with the sound of a latch releasing, the door shed a thin coating of dust. However unbelievable to a citizen of the modern world, this ancient locking mechanism was calibrated to the fingerprint of the owner.

Without the slightest show of effort, she pushed the door open and slipped into the dark interior. A glass-paned bronze lamp was hanging on the wall. Two yards in, the floor became a descending flight of stone stairs.

The blue-white light wavered across her face. "It's been five hundred years," she said to herself, praising the lamps that had been burning steadily all that time.

She lifted the lamp off the wall and smoothly started down the

stairs. Down she went. And further down. Down into the depths of the darkness. An eternal spiral to the bottom of the black.

There was no telling how much time passed. It was just as likely that time did not exist here. Another iron door blocked her way. She opened it the same way she had the previous one and went inside.

Another iron door. She opened it. And another. Every door was more than two inches thick. Solid metal. Whatever thing was confined deep in the bowels of the ship could not be contained by anything less.

Passing through the final door, she was confronted by the figure of a person occupying a chair ten feet in front of her. They were in a room of sorts. A round table and black shelves sat in a wan, smoky light.

There was nothing between them and her. But where she stood seemed to be a completely different place. The figure stood up. A man who yielded to Ryuuki nothing in terms of majesty and size.

“It has been a long time, Princess.”

He spoke in crisp Chinese, though with a heavy rasp in his voice. His phraseology and accent identified him as a subject of the Song Dynasty.

“I’m impressed. When it comes to learning the language of another country, and anything else for that matter, I always knew you to be a man without peer.”

“I’ve had nothing else to do these past five hundred years but read books.”

He approached her. But stopped after the first three feet. His feet continued to move. He should be getting nearer, but wasn't taking up any more of her field of view. He reached out with both hands but couldn't cross the space dividing them.

He soon gave up and returned to his chair. The springs creaked.

"What do you want?" Suppressed anger tinged his voice.

"I came to let you out."

"What?"

The woman smiled charmingly. "There is one provision, something you must do first. It turns out it was worth keeping you sealed up here for five hundred years."

"Oh, and what happened to your eyes? And your hand—why is it covering your face? Someone exists who could do that to your fair skin? Killing him must be my job."

"Exactly. No need prevaricating with you. So will you do it?"

"I would kill my own mother to get out of this jail. Well, if I hadn't killed her already, that is."

"Your opponent is very strong." The sense of danger welled up in her voice. "You know Ryuuki, don't you? The man who locked you up in here. He attacked twice and was twice repulsed."

The figure swayed. Silent laughter, the woman realized. "In any case, how do you wish him killed?"

"The method is up to you. As long as he ends up dead."

“Leave it to me. So will you open the doors?”

“Later. Right now, Ryuuki is having another stab at it.”

“A waste of time.” A terrible hostility lurked in the scornful laughter. He put on a placid front. “I see. He’s your baby, after all. Fine. If he falls under the heel of the enemy again, I’ll awaken the fiery passions within. But what reward should I expect as I set forth?”

Saying nothing, she touched her gown with her right hand, in the center of her sternum. The fabric rent in two, sliding off her porcelain-like body and falling to her feet.

Taking several steps forward, the invisible wall between them suddenly wasn’t there anymore. She settled her white body onto the man sitting in the chair, the smell of blood wafting up around them.

“What a nice perfume. You’ve been soaking in your pool of blood?”

“Like it?” she asked.

His answer was to grab her breasts. She bowed her back. “Hoh. The best reward of all. Let’s enjoy ourselves, shall we?” As he spoke, something wet and tongue-like flicked against the woman’s throat.

“Yes, yes,” she moaned, and then shouted. The wild, violent passion of the scene was such that if Ryuuki or Kikiou were watching, they’d be unlikely to tear their eyes away.

“Leave it to me. What fine breasts. I could suck them forever and

never get bored. How about you take that hand away? Hey, what a mess of a face. What are you twisting away for? Just the kind of girl I love to fuck. Let me lick that fucked up face of yours. Look at me. Tastes good. Ashamed? It stings, don't it? Bitter dregs, huh? *Ha ha ha ha*—"

He roared with laughter, a ribald noise that erupted toward heaven. This was the same laughter that Shuuran and Ryuuki had heard in the corridor above.

In the midst of the dusky light—in the black and white shadows—the carnal heaving and writhing commenced, his words mingling together with her gasping, panting breath—

"Just you watch. That man is dead."

Hot desire reduced his voice to a husky growl. He was so deep and hard inside her, their bodies so tightly welded together, that it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Chapter Three

Setsura Aki walked casually along the dusky road.

This was the kind of summer evening when a man couldn't take ten steps before his forehead was damp with sweat. The time of day when housewives rushed about making last-minute purchases for dinner. When kids carrying talismans and water pistols filled with holy water played cops-and-robbers with the more harmless species of gremlin. When hard-working businessmen hurried home, briefcases in hand.

The everyday activities in July here in the "safe area" that brought the streets of Arakimachi to life.

Setsura showed up like a broomstick shoved between the spokes of those smooth routines. What made passersby mopping their foreheads and necks with handkerchiefs stop and gape *wasn't* the sight of a long black duster and black high-collar shirt, all completely out of season.

Rather, when it came to upsetting the ordinary routine, even wild and woolly creatures from the no-go areas in the DMZ couldn't compete with what could be called this man's heartbreaking beauty.

Usually the unapproachable man-of-mystery, clothed in a vague, indefinable air, would transform into someone friendly and approachable. But that wasn't the case here.

The cool eyes, the finely chiseled features—that a sculptor would

give anything to carve in stone—and that sense of high risk. The combination impressed pedestrians with a sense of danger, while the young women watched him pass by, their cheeks blushing with undisguised desire.

Ryuuki's *qi* had put Setsura through the wringer. He felt like he had a ton of lead on his back. The fatigue filled his gut, constricted his veins. After ten yards he was out of breath.

But taking a break was out of the question. This was one time when he couldn't put off until tomorrow what had to be done right now. If anything, he had to pick up the pace. Based on what he'd understood from Mephisto alone, these were no run-of-the mill villains.

More than anything else, Mephisto had messed it up with Ryuuki and hadn't come out of it much better than himself. Add the powers of the other three into the mix—

Then there was that little incident at the hospital. The vampire lady came for him and took off without finishing the job. Setsura didn't understand what had gone down either. But seeing how she'd easily broken through all the security fail-safes in Mephisto Hospital —that the devil himself could not escape from—sent a shiver down his spine.

To make matters worse, Takako had been infected by those poisonous fangs.

He felt like his head was full of steaming muck. The bright face of that college coed was planted there like an orchid in his mind. Even granting that she'd gotten in way over her head of her own

accord, she'd tasted Ryuuki's terrors at his shop and then voluntarily stuck with him all the way to the hospital, where she'd met a much worse fate.

There was no way he could just walk away from her now. It was possible that other victims like Takako were multiplying somewhere in this city at this very moment.

What made vampires so truly terrifying was their ability to reproduce so quickly in such a fashion. Once bitten, the victims became vampires as well, and then turned on their friends and family without mercy.

Demon City Shinjuku was like a cancerous cell in the body of the peaceful world. The bloody flower bloomed in the darkness, and before anybody knew it, was wafting its pollen into the air and gently coaxing open the petals in another garden. There was no way to predict what manner of annihilation awaited them.

Whenever the thought crossed his mind, the roiling impatience made his eyes glow with an ominous light and brought a thin smile to his lips. The labored stride of this young man—who alone understood the true terrors of the situation—concealed the inner strength and resolve necessary to stand against the darkness.

Approaching a row of prefab houses, he stopped in his tracks. In a crook in the road, where the main thoroughfare hung a dogleg to the right, an expected pall of silence suddenly fell.

These prefab houses were vacant. A poisonous miasma hit his nostrils.

The effects of the Devil Quake were not limited to plants and animals, but worked their way into the air and soil. The miasma that had emptied out the residential district in Arakimachi was one such result.

These changes occurred at the molecular level. The earth absorbed the phantom winds and coughed out the gasses in an unending stream. To make matters worse, it didn't happen until a year after the residences were rebuilt, and seemed to target the people living there.

Miraculously, the gasses contained no components harmful to human life. On the contrary, they proved quite effective at eradicating certain monster species. But the stinging acrid smell couldn't be filtered or treated or sealed off. In a month, everybody had moved away.

Only one man remained behind. Setsura found such half-crazed bullheadedness amusing. But he hadn't fully considered the source of such bullheadedness.

A possibly fatal blunder for a Demon City P.I.

The house he was looking for was the same as all the other prefab houses. Except that it had that particular air of being lived in. Setsura still wasn't aware that about an hour before, an old man with white hair and a white beard appeared in front of that house and slipped like a shadow into the foyer.

Several seconds later the house had swayed and shook and collapsed without a sound. Standing in the midst of the rubble, the old man dropped a small cube at his feet. Smoky liquid streamed out

as if from an atomizer and enveloped the entire house and the ground it once stood on.

The box trembled like a living thing. In a twinkle it grew to the size of the house, reproducing its exterior walls as an exact duplicate, down to the location of the windows and doors and the preexisting damage to the walls.

A short while later, the old man himself appeared at the front door. He smiled a malicious smile. At the end of the walk he turned right and disappeared down the street.

After the front door closed, leaving just a hairline crack behind, a faint, honey-like odor wafted up around the house for several yards in every direction.

Setsura stopped a dozen feet from the house, the brakes applied by a sixth sense that had steered the manhunter clear of many bloody obstacles before. He didn't understand exactly why, but a fog of danger surrounded the house.

Still, he kept on going. An odor he wasn't fully conscious of drifted by his nose. His senses would have detected any lethal compounds. It didn't because the odor itself contained nothing harmful.

Like the pheromones secreted by a bitch in heat, the purpose of the scent was to attract the male, in this case to lure Setsura into the house. And unlike an alley cat, this odor possessed a kind of living beauty.

On the front porch, Setsura briefly glanced around before

pressing the intercom button. Nobody answered. A knock had the same result. He put his hand on the doorknob and turned. The cold sensation he received surely came from the metal doorknob. The door easily opened.

"Hello?" Setsura called out, stepping onto the concrete pad of the *genkon*.

None of the lights were on. Because the man didn't have a phone, Setsura hadn't been able to do anything in advance other than confirm the address.

A long moment passed. A human figure emerged out of the darkness and hurried down the hallway. An old man bent over from osteoporosis, walking with clumsy, labored steps.

Something's wrong here, a warning whispered down in the pit of Setsura's stomach. *This old man—*

A face—exactly the same as in the photo Toya had emailed him—glared at him and said in a demanding voice, "What?"

Setsura nodded politely and held out a business card. "Professor Niwa?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to ask you some questions about your field of academic expertise."

Without a glance at the card, Professor Niwa turned around. He trudged back the way he came, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Just a minute—"

“Follow me,” the old man bluntly instructed him.

Setsura reached behind him and closed the door, and stepped up from the *genkon*.

The old man passed through the door he’d exited from a minute ago. Setsura trailed behind him. He felt an odd sensation coming up from the floor through the soles of his feet. A close look revealed nothing unusual.

Every inch of the approximately twelve-foot square, Japanese-style room with a tatami mat floor was strewn with clutter. The interior decor consisted of a musty set of living room furniture, an overhead light fixture and dust. The plaster walls were lined with a spider’s web of cracks and actual spider webs.

The only thing that seemed out of place was the sweet smell. Though Setsura had noticed it by now, it was not enough to prompt him to leave.

“Please have a seat.” The old man settled into the sofa and motioned Setsura to a chair.

“Pardon me,” said Setsura, sitting down. His butt sank into the soft cushions.

“What pressing matter did you need to see me about?”

“Among your various fields of expertise, would you happen to know anything about the black art of containing and sealing one world inside another?”

“I believe so,” the professor promptly answered. “However, that

is something I do not speak about. And now that you've asked, you shan't be leaving here either."

"Oh?" Setsura flashed a thin smile.

The old man spoke in a dry, raspy whisper. "A curious Chinese gentlemen dropped by and did some remodeling. I took the opportunity to add some of my own renovations. Like this—"

He poked himself in the left eye with his index finger. The finger sank all the way in. Without so much as a twitch, he pulled it out. The eyeball between his fingers glared at Setsura. At the same time, fluid poured from the eye socket like black crude gushing from an oil well.

The sweetly acidic smell quickly filled the room. Setsura made for the door.

The faint scent of this odor was the same scent that hung around the outside of the house as well. Its composition aside, a sudden slackening in the sensation coming up through his feet brought its purpose to his attention.

It wasn't so much like concrete turning to quicksand as cold mud warming. In the next moment, Setsura had sunken through the floor up to his waist. A strange noise rang down from the ceiling. The moment he knew that something was amiss, he'd thrown out a strand of devil wire for support, looping it around the light fixture.

It wasn't the sound of the ceiling boards ripping apart. More like the sound of flesh being torn through from within.

Like a sinking ship, one half of the squirming floor heaved up

while the other half plunged down. The floor moved like a storm-tossed ocean. As did the ceiling. The synthetic sheetrock turned black and silver, laced with blue and green, and stirred together like a spreading oil slick.

Setsura didn't look at either. He'd sensed this room's true nature the moment he'd detected that "off" sensation on the soles of his feet. Instead he fixed his eyes on Niwa.

The stubborn geezer had to be already dead and was up and around only as bait to lure Setsura into the trap. Now the old man reached up to his face and ripped it off. A fissure opened all the way down to his throat. A sweet, honey-like liquid erupted out of the crack.

It lashed the floor and ceiling into a frenzy of desire. Pieces of the floor peeled off in strips and whipped through the air. Blue-green snakes. Beady eyes stared coldly at Setsura. Thread-like tongues flicked from grinning mouths.

Something like a slab of meat fell from the ceiling onto the back of his neck. He reached up and slapped it away. It resembled a cross between a flatfish and a sea slug. Its cool and bluish translucent body was speckled with dark red dots. It was rapidly growing.

From feeding on Setsura's blood. This was the first giant vampire leech he'd seen, even in Shinjuku. Another one sprang at him. He batted it away.

The wriggling leech was swallowed up by the floor. Though by now the "floor" was anything but. The thousands of intertwined "ropes" wound, unwound and zigzagged back and forth. The "ropes"

were snakes.

Setsura looked up at the ceiling. It resembled the surface of a heaving ocean, a sight to freak out any normal person, no matter how evenly disposed. Leeches. Just like the one that had sucked his blood. They were packed so tightly together that they formed a single mass, heaving and rolling in a nausea-inducing motion covering every square inch.

But not *every* square inch. *In China for four thousand years, with all the time in the world on their hands, and this is the best he could come up with?* That was the sardonic thought passing through Setsura's mind.

The snakes wriggled all around him. The giant leeches rained down from the ceiling. Setsura didn't know it, but these were deadly poisonous *zheng-zhe* snakes.

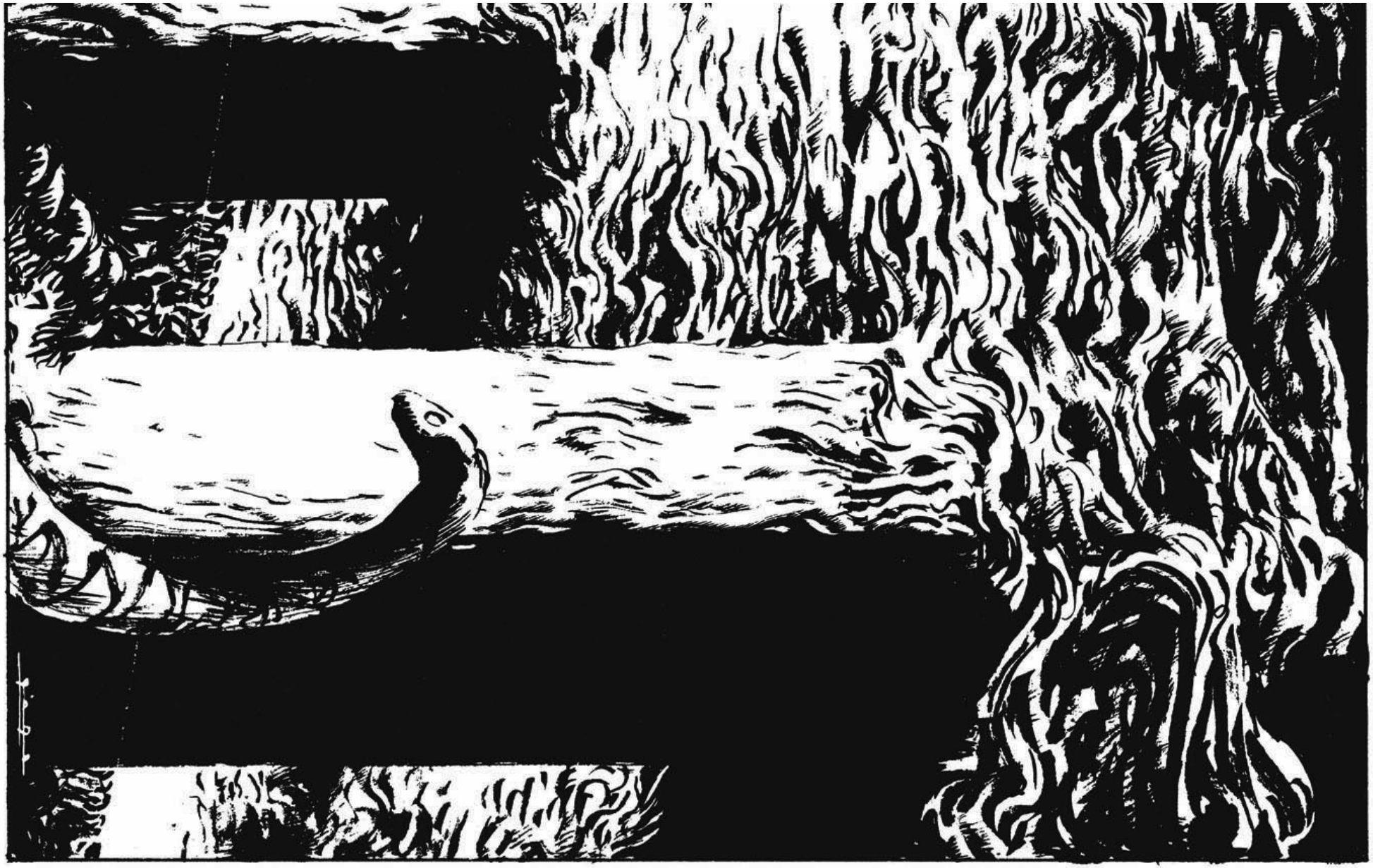
They were a little over two feet long—not terribly large, but their bite could fell an ox. The volume of snake venom injected was as bad as the toxicity. There was some hope for the victim as long as the amount was slight, but there was nothing "slight" about the legendary bite of these snakes. It was all or nothing for the prey.

And yet they did not attack.

The leeches on the ceiling were called *naruko*. They were said to swarm out of the mountain forests from November to early summer of the next year. Their bite was hardly a pinprick. A man with a strong physique could ignore it entirely. But after ten paces or so, the rapid blood loss would keel him over. The Chinese characters for *naruko* meant "crying child," because that was the shrill sound its

victims made as they lay dying.

Along with the *zheng-zhe*, they were ready to conduct a thorough war of extermination, just as they had four centuries before. So why did none of them make the first move?



Setsura's right hand moved slightly. His body shot upwards right through the middle of the "floor." He bounded up a good yard above the clump of snakes. Lurching forward, he quickly found his footing, swaying back and forth in a clumsy manner quite uncharacteristic for him.

Something streaked upwards toward Setsura's precarious perch. It tore apart lengthwise in midair, exposing its innards as it dropped into the sea of snakes.

"It's getting dicey in here—" Setsura muttered to himself.

He meant the jumping snakes and whatever had launched itself at him as he balanced on the devil wire strung through the air. This "tightrope" was tied to two telephone poles on either side of Niwa's house. As for why he'd avoided the house's frame—

Reaching the dining room, he teetered again. The damage inflicted by Ryuuki's *qi* was still with him. He reached out to steady himself and touched what looked like an ordinary blue stucco wall.

His hand sunk through the wall down to his wrist. He had to brace his legs to keep from doing a nosedive. The hole gaped open at the height of Setsura's chest and caved in, turning into an army of black centipedes rushing up his arm.

Setsura shook his arm. Whipping off the bugs, he contemplated an escape route out of the house. It was clear that the entire structure, from the floorboards to the framing pillars, was made from the corrupted pestilence of the living world.

The liquid erupting from Professor Niwa's body had stimulated

whatever the house was made of and drove it into a mad ferocity. The centipedes Setsura had flung off his arm were snatched out of the air by the snakes, the hundreds of little legs churning helplessly. As one snake tried to gulp down its catch, another lunged at its mouth, while others snapped at its neck and torso. Fangs were bared and the poison flowed without any distinction between friend and foe.

The writhing ropes froze in rigor mortis and were swallowed up by their companions on the floor.

In his present condition, escape looked impossible. In order to evade the attacks by the reptiles and insects, he had to become a dead man. His body temperature fell to room temperature. His pulse was zero. All signs of life ceased. His body cast off no smell and no infrared signature. No different from a stone or an old piece of wood.

The snakes and leeches detected their prey by smell or heat. When Setsura was a child, his father brought a yoga master from India to teach him. Five years ago, he'd used these techniques against a homicidal monster who read the aura surrounding living things in order to launch its deadly attacks. In another incident, he'd used it in the infirmary of the "death match" coliseum outside Shin-Okubo Station.

It was the same when he was momentarily mired in the floor and the poisonous snakes didn't think to snap at him. The leech that had sucked his blood had landed on him purely by chance, not because it was reacting to his body temperature and smell. And because he was more or less a "corpse," even those actions were limited.

Balancing on top of the tightrope, though, was the result of his innate skills. The question was whether he could advance another ten paces along the wire in his current condition.

If he fell to the floor and was bitten by the snakes, a dead man couldn't die twice. At the same time, whoever had laid this trap must be watching. Setsura had plenty of reason to fear that that person was lying in wait to finish him off. Set the whole house on fire and he'd be pretty much out of options. No matter how "dead" he was now, he'd be even deader then.

Setsura took a strand of the devil wire and inserted it into his neck. He closed his eyes and focused his entire consciousness as the wire embedded itself in his spine.

He did this in order to traverse the tightrope. He commanded the nerves that controlled his muscles. Relying on his fingertips alone, the beautiful manhunter guided the sub-micron devil wire inside his body.

A black rain poured from the ceiling. Aggravated by the squirming leeches, the snakes writhing on the floor uncoiled themselves into the air. Leeches adhered to his head and neck and back while the blue-green snakes slithered over his shoes, inside his slacks and up his legs, inside his shirt.

Inside the squirming mass, Setsura stood with his arms folded across his chest. In order to sense the slightest disturbance along the wire, he purged his thoughts and disciplined his stance, like an ascetic monk remaining aloof from the world and true to the faith while suffering evil's corrupt enticements and painful lashes.

A snake peeked its head out from the open collar of his shirt and wrapped its tail around his neck. Another opened its mouth and licked his lips with its forked tongue.

If the snake could feel human emotions and could communicate its emotions through its eyes, then the look in the snake's eyes as it gazed upon Setsura's countenance would be one of carnal desire. It twisted its body into the shape of a curved sickle and pressed not just its tongue but its grotesque head against Setsura's lips.

And then, *ahh*, it was inspired to plunge deeper into Setsura's mouth—

But the frenzied head withdrew a second later. The leeches convulsed. How would these creatures without emotions or thoughts telegraph the changes they sensed?

Setsura had been standing in a slightly slumped posture. Now he straightened and turned his eyes forward. His whole body was covered with reeking reptiles. With clumsy steps but miraculously maintaining his balance, he set off across the invisible suspension bridge.

The giant leeches crawled on his face—the poisonous snakes writhed around his neck—and yet look again, and they were not slimy disgusting creatures, but had somehow become fashion accessories to the beauty of his presence.

The walking dead man, transformed into the *other* Setsura, turned the brutal, subhuman creatures that attacked him into glittering ornaments.

From the outside, the Niwa residence still looked perfectly normal. Standing at the front gate thirty feet away, an old man in a long robe and holding a staff stared intently at the house.

In the falling dark, a fierce look further clouded Kikiou's face. Having once stepped inside, no enemy ever escaped his "Reptile Mansion." However, the calm and composed figure emerging from the foyer punched a hole through that overweening confidence.

"Unbelievable—" he muttered in the tongue of an ancient land.

Setsura Aki's unmistakable figure walked through the air. He descended from the "tightrope" that was invisible even to Kikiou's eyes and uncrossed his arms from his chest. As he did, the remaining vestiges of unnatural clumsiness evaporated from his body.

"Bastard! You broke out of my snare!" Anger and fury further darkened the old schemer's face. He was about to launch into another death-dealing attack when Setsura looked at him.

A casual glance at best. His eyes quickly focused on a point further in the distance, barely taking note of Kikiou. But the peerless warlock froze in place. The look that pierced him did not belong to the man he knew as "Setsura Aki."

A sense of dread he'd felt from few people in four thousand years of blood told him that this was no mere enemy. The boundless vibe being cast off by this young man was something he hadn't ever imagined.

Kikiou watched the departing Setsura. After the figure in the black duster disappeared from his sight, he groaned to himself,

“What manner of man is this? I would have thought him easier to handle than that doctor. But tangling with him will require more than a positive mental attitude.”

He spun around and set off quickly in the opposite direction.

After the two demon-haunted men left, all that remained of the Niwa house was the barely-human corpse of an old man and a small cube-shaped object. The illusionary house created by Kikiou’s magic sat in a crumbled, crushed heap, along with the phantom beasts the house had given birth to.

Amidst the wreckage, one by one, the desiccated snakes and leeches and centipedes floundered and struggled, grasping vainly for that final hold on life.

Kikiou continued down the street to where it joined up again with the main shopping district.

Rounding the corner of the road came a burly, uniformed man. The tinted goggles on his helmet were flipped back. He had a UHF transceiver around his neck like a choker. The ballistic fabric of his thickly-woven shirt doubled as a heavy-duty flak jacket. He wore an anti-personnel electric nightstick on his hip.

The gold badge on his chest identified him as a police commando, whose fearsome presence in Shinjuku would quiet even a crying child. They usually patrolled in pairs, but in a place like Arakimachi his partner would be hanging back at the patrol car.

These mobile police commandos were said to combine the courage of a tiger and the wariness of a rabbit. They handled

themselves with a heroic swagger. This one sported a beard and a splendid moustache. His body imparted the impression of a rolling boulder.

They passed each other without exchanging glances. Five or six steps later, the man said curtly, “Hey.”

Kikiou stopped. “What is it?”

“What are you doing here?” The commando cop smiled. The bluntness was confined to his voice.

“Nothing in particular. Just passing through.” Kikiou turned only his head and smiled genially.

“Tourist?”

“No.”

“In that case, you should steer clear of places like that.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“You got an I.D. on you?”

“Sorry, I’m afraid I left it at home.”

“A friend of mine was attacked the other night by a Chinese fellow using some mighty weird mojo.”

“You don’t say.”

“Well, in this city, there are no shortage of Chinese up to their elbows in weird mojo. There’s one in my lockup at least every night. But you wouldn’t catch them sauntering out of Arakimachi’s no-go area. Anybody other than you and I might let it slide. Sorry, but I’ve

got to investigate all suspicious behavior. No need to make a federal case out of it. I'll escort you back to your house. Once I confirm your bona fides, you're free to go."

"In that case, I would not object." Kikiou's smile grew broader. "Let us be on our way. Incidentally, that friend of yours, how is he doing?"

"I've been so busy, I haven't been back to the hospital to see him. But knowing him, he'd already be up and about, hard as that may be to believe."

"Good news in any case."

"So, where do you live?" said the commando cop, urging him on. "Lead the way."

"By all means," said Kikiou, turning around, his back to the commando cop.

The cop scrambled to catch up, closing his right hand around the handle of the electric nightstick hanging from his waist. Outside of Shinjuku, this kind of attitude could cause problems. But otherwise, the police pretty much had a free hand short of outright violence. When it came to a simple I.D. check, a cop could never be too careful.

Still, as he brought the nightstick down against the base of the old man's neck, he checked his swing a bit. The five-thousand volt charge alone, traveling from head to toe, would lay any normal human being out flat.

Instead, a tremendous force slammed into his solar plexus. The

commando cop knew that this was no ordinary old man. He reeled back a good ten feet. Feeling his ribs, three or four of them were broken. Fortunately, his internal organs seemed intact.

"*Shit*," the commando cop hissed through clenched teeth. "Never doubt your instincts. That grandpa's got some crazy-ass moves on him."

"A public servant striking a citizen from behind—just what I should expect in Demon City. It surely was worth coming all the way here."

"Son of a bitch!"

"Hope always follows despair. A fine way to dispose of Setsura Aki occurs to me. To that end, your assistance will be necessary."

"Fuck off," the commando cop retorted, his right hand blurring through the air faster than any old man could dodge out of the way. The nightstick slammed into the nape of his neck with enough force to drive it into the flesh.

"*Wha—?*" he gaped. The stinging response ringing through the nightstick was that of a bat striking solid metal.

Kikiou's staff whirled like a small tornado. Bobbing and weaving, parrying blows to his groin and chin, the commando cop grabbed his elbow with his left hand and raised his numb right arm. The laser gun swiveled with a soft *click-click-click*, drawing aim on the grandpa's face.

"Freeze."

But the staff was again slashing at him. Blue light enveloped his right hand. The commando cop observed with no small satisfaction as the blade of light leapt out and pierced the man's forehead.

The old man grinned. Jutting his unmarred brows forward as if to afford him a better look, he said, "Any more tricks up your sleeve? Well, then. I'll make your dreams come true. Come along to our world."

He jabbed the tip of his staff slightly forward. Nothing else out of the ordinary was seen or heard in the steel-gray dusk. The commando cop's chin slumped to his chest. Like a poet overcome by melancholy he stood there, unmoving, in the fading twilight.

Part Three: Lament Of The Vampiress

Chapter One

Doctor Mephisto was in his office when the receptionist informed him that Setsura had arrived.

The mountain of books perched atop his large desk alone prompted visitors to give it a wide berth. A quick glance at the bindings and front material of these books—so well-preserved that they appeared to be recent editions—often induced audible exclamations of surprise.

A monograph on *Vampire Behaviors* by an anonymous thirteenth-century Spanish monk. From the same period, *Practical Sorcery* by a Vatican scholar and priest who was burned at the stake along with his entire library as soon as its existence came to light.

Vampire Observations by Berlitz Hosten, a compilation of studies about the demon world purportedly dating back to the Middle Ages. The only surviving remnants of the book were said to be permanently sealed within the special collections archives at the British Museum and the Sorbonne in Paris.

The exhaustive account of one "Mr. Gérard," a Paris florist who for twenty years drank the blood of the residents living in his neighborhood. Simply titled *Autobiography*, it constituted the only known personal diary of a vampire.

It was anybody's guess what Mephisto was trying to glean from these accursed manuscripts. As he was perusing the last page of the

last volume, the holograph of a woman's face appeared in the air before him. His receptionist, announcing Setsura's arrival.

"What does he want?" Mephisto asked, in an uncharacteristically tired voice.

"He says he's here for an examination."

"Though I was scheduled for this afternoon." The woman's face took on a heroic kind of beauty. It had changed to Setsura. Mephisto's eyes briefly glowed of their own accord. But the light soon disappeared.

"Who worked you over this time?" he asked softly.

"Kikiou," Setsura answered in a subdued voice.

"No wonder, then. He's a four-thousand-year-old alchemist and warlock, after all. Did you finish him off?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"This doesn't bode well for the reputation of Shinjuku's number one manhunter."

"He wasn't the guy I was looking for."

"Go to the hospital director's examination room. I'll see you there in two minutes."

"Got it."

The handsome image raised its hand in a half-salute and vanished. Mephisto let out a long sigh. That sigh and his gloomy visage weren't what anybody else around the hospital ever saw. Was

it a message intended for Setsura? Or himself?

He was getting up from his desk when the receptionist appeared again.

"What?"

"A Mrs. Kanan says she must see you. Her daughter is a patient here."

"Yes, let her know I got the message and that I'll be personally visiting her daughter's room later."

"Got it. No, I mean – understood, sir."

The chagrined realization that she'd answered the same as Setsura showed on the face of the usually frosty receptionist as her image faded away.

Mephisto manipulated the ring on his left hand. A holographic scene of the receptionist and a middle-aged lady sitting across from her projected into the air.

The older lady's countenance was a bit pinched behind the thick lenses of her glasses. Her original beauty could still be discerned. Her plain navy blue suit hung on her loosely, but the line of her full breasts and hips betrayed the wearer's matronly intentions. Walk down the street in a slightly more fashionable wardrobe and she'd have no problem attracting cougar bait.

Any eager cub who strayed too close to this cat though, could expect to get cuffed for the trouble.

"Yes, it has been a difficult day for the both of us," Mephisto

said to no one in particular, striding like a white shadow to the door.

"Sir Kikiou—"

The woman's voice rolled like pearls through the turquoise-lit room. A room in the manor house of the Demon Princess. It was surrounded by the water and a green so dark it was almost black.

Elsewhere in the manor house, the wafting smell of blood seemed to account for all the gradations between light and shade. But opening the door to Kikiou's room, here alone Shuuran was met by a draft of inorganic air, cool and mechanical.

Her eyes, brimming with fear and anger, flitted from the old man and the bed he was lying on to that of a uniformed figure sprawled in the middle of the floor.

"What's that?"

"A police officer. And what's more, an acquaintance of Setsura Aki."

"Oh?" she said softly. She peered down at the bearded man's face, green in the turquoise light.

Observing the violet gleam in her eyes, Kikiou said gravely, "I understand how you feel. He has already become an old enemy to Ryuuki and an obstacle to us. However tempting it might be to tear his acquaintances limb from limb, there is something else I wish you to do."

"What?" Shuuran knit her brows together.

"How is Princess faring?"

“She has retired to her bedroom. The pain in her face does not abate.”

“So my potions are not efficacious?” A chord of disappointment colored Kikiou’s voice. “I should have expected as much from the Toyama Elder. By which I mean no praise, though this cloud might yet possess a silver lining. As a consequence, Princess has resolved in her heart to curse this city and its inhabitants. She is now agreeable to my original plans of total subjugation. Were you to turn all of its citizens into your companions, the world would look the other way. They’d tear down the bridges, throw up the barricades, and leave everything in our hands. Soon communication with the outside world would cease. Better to see no evil and hear no evil and pretend to live together in peace.”

Kikiou paused to let the implications settle in. “However, while there are limits to the lives of those watching over us, you and I and our servants will live forever. The watchers will come and go. Their loathing and vigilance will slacken. All the while we will be proceeding step-by-step toward the realization of our ambitions, whether it takes a hundred years or two. But the time will come when a new bridge shows up in a place never expected, and our brothers and sisters, with their fair skin and white fangs, will cross over to the outside world. There’s no need to explain what will happen after that. Given the population of Demon City at our disposal, domination that wouldn’t come easily to the four of us alone shall be like taking candy from a baby.”

“I suppose.”

“You *suppose*?”

Shuuran ignored the flash of anger in Kikiou's power-drunk eyes. "An unrealized ambition is no different from a fleeting dream. How many years have we lived? How many dreams have we dreamed? Princess does not fuss over Sir Kikiou's desires, and it is she whose lead I follow. However—"

"However?"

"Your ambitions aside, I will cooperate in any way I can in order to see the extinction of Setsura Aki. He is Ryuuki's foe, first and foremost."

"Exactly. Setsura Aki holds in his hands the fate of the man *you* desire. We have stumbled across an area of mutual interest."

"And what would you have me do?"

"Drink the blood of this police officer. Make him your servant. And then—" Kikiou motioned for her to approach and then whispered something in her ear.

"I can't do that—"

"Yes, putting her prized retainer in such a precarious position may anger Princess. She really does value you highly in that respect."

"That's not it."

"No?"

"No. As far as Princess's anger is concerned, I will take whatever she wishes to give. But I will do nothing to incur Ryuuki's wrath."

"And what would cause him to hate you so?"

“Because he is a soldier.”

Kikiou mulled this over in silence. She was resolute on the subject. Not only him, but even the Demon Princess lying groaning in her dusky casket would be powerless to dissuade her on this point.

Shuuran proudly continued. “Alive or dead, the soldier’s skill decides the contest. If he had a son, he would still condemn his own flesh and blood to death for breaking that rule of combat. The laws of war mean nothing to me, but abusing them would irreparably tarnish his honor.”

“Even if it meant the destruction of *that* man?”

This time it was Shuuran who fell silent. The fierce look vanished from her young face, replaced by one of uncertainty and distress.

“If you asked him, I believe Ryuuki would say that he is setting forth to meet Setsura in his final battle. His last chance to atone for his past mistakes.”

“Then he will win.”

“Ordinarily, I would agree with you. However, his opponent quite easily took his arm and lived to tell the tale. This one time, today’s wishes will not make tomorrow’s dreams come true.”

Shuuran had nothing to say in response.

“Besides, supposing that he lives and does not deliver a fatal blow, it’s not beyond the realm of possibilities that he would give up

the ghost of his own accord."

A sudden bout of vertigo overwhelmed Shuuran. She slumped back against the old man. He supported her weight briefly, and then seized her with an iron grip and roughly forced her down onto the bed.

"Stop—what are you—"

He pinned her struggling arms and pressed her down with the weight of his body. "If words do not prove persuasive, then I shall resort to other means. Past or present, when it comes to bringing a woman to heel, simply taking command of her body will do the trick."

"Let go of me. Let me go!" she screamed, and there could be little doubt that she was quite aware of what would follow.

A single swipe of her slender hand sent Kikiou's body flying through the air. Except in the split second before he hit the ground a dozen feet away, a kind of motorized sound sang out from around his midsection.

Startled, Shuuran turned around. In her eyes reflected the image of the old man springing back along the same arc on which he'd sailed away from her, like a movie run in reverse. He reached out and pinned her again. This time, employing supernatural forces, hardly moving a finger. Shuuran writhed in agony.

"I'll never lose any contest of strength with you. Will you try and use those eyes of yours? You should know what does and doesn't work on me. Let me school you once again."

A muffled, crunching sound rang out—Shuuran's shoulders dislocating. She groaned aloud. He tore open the front of her dress. She wore nothing underneath. Her breasts swayed, larger than outward appearances suggested. The old man buried his face between them like a hungry dog and gnawed on her flesh.

She threw her head back. "*Ahhh*—" Vampires could feel pain.

"Getting all worked up, are you? Your nipples are nice and hard. Think about it. At this rate, you'll never sleep with Ryuuki. You've traveled together for two thousand years. Despite the mutuality of your feelings, you are as chaste as a nun to him. You'll just have to summon more of those men and treat yourself to more Sumptuous Feasts."

"Stop it."

"I understand. The vampire's nature." Kikiou licked Shuuran's gasping throat. A band of saliva glimmered on her white skin. "But the cruel, hard fact of the matter is, know love once, and you will willingly consign yourself to the depths of hell and madly drown yourself in its passions. Right now, as far as you are concerned, you could never love another man the way you love Ryuuki. Even knowing he is Princess's love slave."

"But he—he doesn't love her."

"Of course not. All the more reason to keep reincarnating him no matter how many times he dies. How long will it take to get the person who doesn't love you to confess that he does? We are indeed an accursed lot."

The old man abruptly pressed his lips against Shuuran's. She reflexively twisted her face away, but not before his slippery-wet tongue plunged into her mouth. Shuuran lost the power to resist.

He stripped off the rest of her clothing. Beneath his watchful eyes and the tent of his robes, her white-hot body gyrated like a writhing snake.

"You cannot stop me. You were mine before Ryuuki ever desired you. Remember that. We wouldn't want him to know, now would we? Regardless of how resigned to reality he professes himself to be, you could not bear him finding out. So we shall proceed according to my previous instructions. Look at the bright side. You put your life on the line and chose to save Ryuuki instead. It would be worth it, even if you are destroyed in the process. No?"

Kikiou waited for her reply. Shuuran nodded, without really knowing why.

“There is one thing I’ve always wanted to try—”

Licking her breasts, his mouth trailed up her chest and sucked at her throat.

“*Ahh*—” The beautiful woman’s body shuddered. Two threads of blood trickled from where his mouth was fastened to the skin like a remora.

“The blood of a vampire. How does it taste to you?”

“Stop. Not that.”

“There’s no stopping at this point. I need you body and soul. I need to bring you down to the depths, so that I can have you like a puppet on a string.”

“*Ahh*—!” She gasped. Her muscles spasmed. He thrust his bloody finger into her mouth. Her lips closed around his finger. Her teeth raked against his flesh, staining both with blood.

“How is the flavor? Is it sweet? Tart? How much of this aroma can you stand? Oh, look, you’re licking it. With that nice red tongue. Patience—”

Kikiou stuck the bloody finger into his mouth and then covered Shuuran’s lips with his own. Shuuran sucked hard enough to draw in her cheeks. Their tongues intertwined and intermingled, as did their blood.

Shuuran growled like a wild animal. Her eyes flashed like rubies.

Fangs sprang into her mouth. She attached her lips to Kikiou's neck. But search as she might for the throbbing arteries, the fangs sank only a few fractions of an inch into the skin.

"Ha. No matter how many lives a man might have, you'll never be satisfied. In all your bloodlust you forgot what this body is made of."

Kikiou reached up to his collar with his talon-like fingers and spread open his robes. *What manner of creature was this?* A silver shaft pierced his body from his neck down to the top of his pelvis, which itself resembled a large metal toy top. His arms and legs consisted of smaller cylinders that meshed with the central shaft. The joints in the regions of his shoulders and pelvis were a fusion of tubes and gears.

Perhaps as a means of maintaining balance, or as a source of energy, in the center of the spine two ring-shaped objects constantly revolved at oblique angles to each other. They didn't appear to be in physical contact with any other part of his torso.

"You can use him well, this Setsura Aki?"

With deliberate actions more obscene than his words, he painted her face with his bloody finger. Nodding over and over, Shuuran crushed her mouth against his cruel lips.

Chapter Two

Although most of the patients in Mephisto Hospital were residents of Demon City, many were relatives and friends of friends. But this kind of relative was a first since the hospital had opened.

After finishing Setsura's examination and observing nothing out of the ordinary, Mephisto suggested meeting with Takako Kanan.

"It hasn't been that long since I saw her last. Why do you ask? Has she taken a turn for the worse?"

"My. Aren't you in a lone wolf mood today."

"Like you'd never have a day like that. C'mon, I'm in no mood to be playing with dolls."

"Better that you call her a *fantoccini*."

"Marionette. Whatever. In any case, hurry up and do something about *my* state of health. I'm beginning to question your reputation."

"I have got my shoulder to the wheel."

"I'm looking for another scholar with the same degree of knowledge as Professor Niwa. I'll let you know what turns up."

With that, Setsura started for the door.

"Oh," said Mephisto, in a meaningful manner. Setsura stopped. A grimace rose to his expressionless face. Mephisto said, "I will be attending the Elder's funeral services after this. If you are not

otherwise engaged, I would like you to come along."

Setsura rolled his eyes. "Sure, why not."

"Fine, then. Before that, you may accompany me to Miss Kanan's room. We will depart directly from there. There is still time."

And so the two of them came to meet Takako's bespectacled mother in the reception area of the special isolation wing where Takako was being held.

"I'm Tomoko Kanan. And you must be Doctor Mephisto?"

"Yes, I am Mephisto," he replied with a polite bow.

In a voice that was the audible equivalent of shoving an ice pick through his forehead, Mrs. Kanan shrieked, "My word! And just what is your sorry excuse for the abominable way this hospital is run?"

"The way the hospital is run?" responded Mephisto, as coolly as ever.

"Yes, the way this hospital is run. I haven't been sitting around in the waiting room so I could be served expensive tea. I came here to see my daughter. What's the hold up? All the runarounds and delays? I asked if she was in critical condition, but all the nurses will say is that her life is not in danger. But they can't tell me anything concrete. This is not the kind of attitude I expect from an institution that purports to call itself a hospital!"

Standing behind Mephisto, Setsura said in a low voice, "I couldn't agree more."

“Doctor, what exactly is the condition of my daughter, Takako? I’m beginning to believe she’s caught some sort of contagious illness.” The glare in her eyes shot through them like a pair of laser beams.

Mephisto nodded. “To be perfectly honest, she contracted a disease that is very close to what you describe.”

“That’s what I thought.” Behind the glasses, anxiety colored her eyes.

“But please don’t worry. Her life is not in danger. I assure you that her condition will not deteriorate as long as we keep her here.”

“And exactly how long will that be?”

“A month, roughly speaking.”

“In the meantime, can’t she be transferred to another hospital?”

“What about our hospital do you find so intolerable?”

“I have no complaints about the facilities. It was obvious from the moment I passed through the front doors. The facilities are top-notch, the staff and doctors well-disciplined. I’m impressed that, above all, the patients appear to be treated equally without regard to financial or social status. However, I cannot agree that there are no grounds to criticize the environment in which this hospital is located. I’ve been interested enough to visit several times in a professional capacity. And each time, the treacherous charms of this city become all the more impossible to ignore. No matter how high-minded one’s spirit and intentions, the atmosphere pervading this city corrupts and corrodes it. No person should be left to convalesce

here, regardless of the good or bad qualities of the hospital itself."

"Good point," Setsura agreed.

Mephisto ignored him. "Your daughter's illness can only be treated here. I will not disagree with everything you say, except that just as we go to a hospital to be healed of a disease while residing among the diseased, only in this corrupt city can we hope for a cure."

"Hope for a cure from what?"

"Your daughter was bitten by a vampire. There is no cure for that anywhere but here."

The woman's mouth half-opened. The handsome physician looked back at her with an ice-cold serenity. Five full seconds passed. Tomoko Kanan said, "Surely you jest! That is the product of someone's imagination run wild, like something out of a fairy tale."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said Mephisto.

"This is Demon City," added Setsura.

Mephisto glared at him over his shoulder. Setsura counted the tiles on the ceiling.

"I just don't know what to think about that—her associating with anything but *people*—that vampires really exist—I guess I'll have to put my faith in you, Doctor Mephisto—if you don't object—"

"As you please," Mephisto said kindly. "If you wish, I can take you to see your daughter. The two of us will accompany you. I will prepare a sedative. Is that fine with you?"

“Yes. Let’s go. I don’t think I’ll need a sedative.”

“Fine, then.” For the first time, a faint smile creased Mephisto’s lips.

Tomoko touched her hand to cheek. She blushed. The passions escaping from the cracks in her emotional state had begun to activate her aesthetic sensibilities.

“Hey, Doctor Hippocrates,” Setsura needled him. He spoke in low tones that sounded like a monk reciting a Buddhist prayer.

Mephisto pretended not to hear. He passed through a door, then Tomoko, with Setsura bringing up the rear.

“Um—” Tomoko said to Mephisto, as they proceeded down the hall.

“What is it?”

“Who is he?”

“The person most directly connected to the incident involving your daughter. In fact, she was at his bedside when she was attacked.”

Tomoko looked at Setsura. The belligerent attitude of a middle-aged lady returned to her face. When Setsura stared at the ceiling a third time, it was Mephisto’s turn to smile.

“And what is your occupation, young man?”

“I own a *senbei* shop.”

“Can you tell me specifically what went on there?”

“Ah—”

After a dialogue that was pretty much a repeat of what had gone on between Tomoko and Mephisto, they arrived at Takako’s room.

Observing her daughter’s vacant eyes turned toward the heavens —eyes set against a bluish, waxy complexion—the two punctures swelling out from the base of her neck like a pair of tumors— Tomoko fully grasped the reality of the situation.

Out of consideration, Mephisto temporarily dismissed the strategically-positioned security personnel.

Setsura felt the lingering doubts he harbored since he’d been discharged that afternoon being rekindled. He’d been attacked, Takako had tasted the poison of the demon woman’s fangs, and then she’d busted through Mephisto Hospital’s heralded defenses without breaking a sweat.

By all rights, he should be the one turning into a hell beast.

But as far as Mephisto was concerned now, all that commotion was beside the point. Setsura had to wonder what more than his soaring pride was sitting on the doctor’s mind.

Tomoko’s questions came one after the other. The relationship between her daughter and Setsura. Why she’d been tending to him in the first place. Why she’d been possessed by the strange disease.

Setsura replied that their relationship was simply one between a *senbei* shop owner and his guest. She’d been with him when he collapsed, and had accompanied him here. He didn’t know why she should have contracted this “disease.”

For the time being, Tomoko accepted these explanations at face value, though she still wasn't satisfied. She wanted to know more about the nature of the vampires. To which Setsura replied by drawing his breath in between his teeth and tilting his head to the side.

"Where do they come from?"

"From China, it seems."

A short silence followed. "Can they enter a room without opening the door?"

"No. They must follow the same physical laws as us. They cannot pass through solid matter. Though it does appear that they can unlock doors without touching the mechanism."

"Any weak points, or way of keeping them out?"

"No. We experimented with crucifixes but they had zero effect."

"That stands to reason. Somewhere in the depths of a human soul that has fused with evil must reside an acknowledgment of those things that are imbued with spiritual powers. Vampires who fear the cross must have recognized its spiritual essence before they became vampires."

"I'm impressed," Setsura said with unfeigned admiration. "In which case, it follows that vampires who loathe crosses must be Christian. But what would happen if a person possessed of a particular religious taboo converted to Christianity and then became a vampire?"

“That person would react just as strongly to a crucifix as to that taboo.” Tomoko spoke in the crisp tones reminiscent of a professor putting an upstart student in his place. “The logical conclusion is that if you can then ascertain the home environment of the creature in question, several methods of subduing it should present themselves.”

“I agree. However, when it comes to the perceived powers of heaven and hell, the numerous facets of our individual customs make it difficult if not impossible to arrive at a standardized approach.”

“May I presume that the *Tao* does not exist that can handle the vampire who attacked my daughter?”

“So it seems. What sort of creature is this, Doctor?” Setsura asked, turning to Mephisto behind him and figuratively tossing him the ball.

The conversation ground to a halt as Mephisto came up with an answer. He said breezily, “I have nothing to add.”

Anyone who didn’t know him might have thought this the dodge of a pretender.

“If she was attacked *inside* Shinjuku and then was taken *outside* Shinjuku, shouldn’t she be safe then?”

“Please consider what would happen if they did come after her.”

Tomoko started to reply but reconsidered. She turned her attention to the bed where her daughter lay. The severe intellectual air vanished, replaced by that of a middle-aged mother anguished over her daughter’s welfare.

“Excuse me,” Setsura said. “It’d be rare to stumble across a vampire outside Shinjuku, but you seem to accept their reality quite readily. You wouldn’t perhaps share with your daughter a similar interest in history?”

“I teach history at Tokyo University.”

Hearing the name of the most respected educational institution in Japan, Setsura nodded to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“There are other matters to which we must attend,” Mephisto announced. “I will speak with the attending physicians and nurses and arrange for separate accommodations. Starting tomorrow you may see her whenever you please. All your needs will be attended to. For now, however, your daughter must remain in our care. I hope you understand the reasons why.”

“Yes, but—” Tomoko didn’t finish the sentence. She stood next to the bed. A strangely cool object jutted out of the blankets and clasped her hand. Looking down, she realized it was her daughter’s hand. “Takako—”

The delight died in her throat. The fingers closed around her wrist felt like writhing snakes. Takako turned and looked at her mother. The empty, demented eyes could not possibly be hers. These weren’t the eyes of a hungry carnivorous beast encountering its prey. No, they were the eyes of a mad serial killer who after doing unspeakably vile things to the victim in his thrall would strangle her

during coitus and carve up the body afterwards.

"Let go. Takako! Let go of me!" She jerked her arm with all her might, but her daughter wouldn't let go.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" Her slack expression betrayed not the slightest sign of inquisitiveness. "Thank you for coming to see me. I am fine. The Doctor and Setsura are doing a good job looking after me. And yet you came all the way to see me."

The blankets slowly fell away from her chest as Takako sat up in the bed. She didn't need her free hand to support herself. Her attitude didn't change. Like a robot.

"I will give you a kiss to thank you."

Her fang-like canines—that her daughter should not possess—were visible behind her lips. Tomoko realized at that moment that everything Doctor Mephisto and Setsura had told her was true.

"Let go, Takako. I'm your mother. Let go." She could only entreat her daughter with the same words over and over.

Takako started to get off the bed. A comely hand covered the hand wrapped around her mother's wrist—Doctor Mephisto's.

A primal growl rose in Takako's throat. She seized Mephisto's wrist with her free hand. A moment later, quite out of the blue, she stopped struggling and her fingers opened. She lay back down on the bed as quickly as she had arisen. Her eyes burned with pain and anger, suggesting that her own will had been overruled by an outside force.

The professor as well seemed on the verge of collapse. Mephisto supported her to the nearby sofa. Her wrist where Takako had grasped it was stained with purple bruises. Tomoko silently massaged the skin, hard enough to scour it away, as if that sensation would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Mephisto placed his hand on hers. Tomoko stopped rubbing her skin. She relaxed and settled back against the cushions.

"Are you finished?" Mephisto asked.

Tomoko nodded. "That is—the victim—of a vampire—?"

"Yes."

"Can she be cured?"

"I will cure her," Mephisto softly guaranteed her. "Your daughter has not yet become a true vampire. If the one who sired her is vanquished, she will recover."

"But—when—?"

"You'd have to ask *him*. He is Shinjuku's best vampire hunter."

He'd just said that a cure would take a month. Mephisto was a genius when it came to passing the buck. Feeling the weight of the lady professor's earnest eyes on him, Setsura scratched the back of his head.

"Give us a month. Doctor Mephisto said as much."

"I understand. I shall hold you to it."

"We'll give it our best shot."

“No effort will be spared,” Mephisto added. “So let us be on our way. She is in the care of our highly-qualified attending physicians. The nurses will prepare her meals. This time of day is when the vampires come out. We have to make sure they don’t get in here.”

After escorting the cowed Tomoko to another room, the two turned toward Mephisto’s private hallway.

“Nice racket you doctors have got here,” Setsura observed with a completely straight face as they strolled along. At times like this, Mephisto was the only person in the world who could tell when Setsura was cracking wise. “Mrs. Kanan clasped your hand and asked you to look after her daughter. But *I* was the one who made Takako let go of her hand and behave herself.”

“And I thank you for that. If you like, I’ll squeeze your hand as hard as she did mine.”

“Do you think that woman will be back tonight?” asked Setsura, changing the subject.

“I am sure she will,” said Mephisto with conviction. He was not a man who ever lacked for conviction. “I hazard she bit Takako in order to make you suffer. She came to drink your blood and the opportunity presented itself. So Takako wastes away day by day, drawing ever closer to those creatures of the night. But coming all this way and being prevented from achieving her goals must have been vexing. You never did tell me how you defended yourself.”

“I don’t know.” Setsura shrugged.

“Maybe you whispered sweet nothings in her ear.”

“Like, *Oh no, not tonight dear*, you mean?”

“Something like that. When it comes to the female of the species that is the nature of the beast.”

“Your female employees will all kill themselves in despair.”

Mephisto didn’t answer.

“So, do you plan to transfer Takako somewhere?” Setsura suggested.

“Yes. When we get back, I shall take measures.”

The two of them left the building. It was night. A limousine was waiting at the front gates. The city of Shinjuku glittered in the background.

“Everything is being spelled out in darkness,” Doctor Mephisto said. “Actors unequaled at their craft have appeared on this most perfect of stages. But are we directing the play? Or them?”

Setsura said, “Or is Demon City?”

With that, the two stepped onto the night-lit battlefield.

Chapter Three

The silhouettes emerged from the building manager's office and proceeded silently in the moonlight. They bore the casket on their shoulders. The buildings to their right and left towered over them like great walls. Behind the casket-bearers followed a larger throng.

The shadows were cast and created by the moonlight. The streetlights were dark. Here and there, the gas lamps preferred by the residents of this block had been extinguished too.

In keeping with the departed's wishes, no one chanted the sutras. There was no music, no tears, no talking as they walked along the thin strip of asphalt.

They arrived at a plaza behind one of the buildings. Nothing grew on this desolate plot of land. In the center of the plaza was a rectangular hole. The shadows approached it. They lowered the casket into it with ropes, then took up shovels and covered it with earth.

No one spoke as the shovels scattered dust and shards of moonlight into the night wind. The hole was filled, the ground leveled, the grave left unmarked. A day later, a visitor would notice nothing different about this lonely patch of land.

The people gathered around where the hole used to be. A long shadow stepped forward. Low voices recited a sutra-like incantation. When they were done, the man bowed deeply, and just as when they

had arrived, the voices ceased and dispersed.

The funeral service was over.

Only the one who'd stepped forward and two other lovely silhouettes remained beside the grave. The moonlight poured down, as if purposely framing them in a spotlight.

Setsura and Mephisto wordlessly greeted Yakou. "I'm glad you were able to take the time to attend." The tall young man politely bowed.

"You are the leader now," Mephisto said. "There is much you will have to attend to."

Yakou nodded in response. There was deep and solemn meaning in the small, stiff gesture of assent.

"I understand. First, we must locate those four and exterminate them from this world. I have already solicited the cooperation of my colleagues. We creatures of the night understand our kind better than anyone. No matter what sacrifice is required, those four must be destroyed."

"I have a request of my own to make," Mephisto said abruptly. Setsura turned to him. "The woman we passed on our way to Shinano drank the blood of one of Setsura's acquaintances."

"Oh, yes. That."

"A girl of barely twenty. Thankfully, she has not yet fully become one of them. But her sire will surely make a repeat appearance. We can discuss the particulars later, but I am interested in securing the

services of several of your stronger men as security guards."

"Gladly."

"I would like to have them dispatched to the hospital as soon as possible. I'll have my people waiting in the lobby."

"Agreed."

"Wait just a second," said Setsura. Both men looked at him. Setsura's otherwise nonchalant expression focused critically on Mephisto. "You're supposed to be a doctor. First do no harm and all that. This isn't one of those patch-it-together-afterward things. You fine with causing needless deaths?"

Mephisto looked at him. His cape fluttered. It shone as if woven from moonlight. "You raise an interesting objection. Are you questioning the power of the Toyama residents?"

"You and I both know how strong she is."

"This is the best way to protect Miss Kanan. You can't be by her side twenty-four seven."

"You leave this much up to me. As we all now know, this is somebody strong enough to kill the Elder. If that's at least enough to make us all take a step back, then it'd be better not to send them out in the first place."

"I don't know, Aki-kun. Do you wish to dash water on their chivalrous spirits?"

"Chivalry and life itself are not interchangeable. I'd prefer that they reconsidered."

“Please have faith in us,” Yakou stated firmly.

“Then I won’t dissuade you.” Setsura’s eyes softened. He said to Yakou, “But I will say this. Everybody is free in this accursed city. Freedom is not at the mercy of moral or common sense. The same goes for a clan where the head decides the fates of others. Though I am grateful to those willing to sacrifice their lives for me, as a result, that girl has been consigned to a life of torment. Only we three and the security guards are responsible for *her* life.”

“I’m sorry, Aki-san—” Yakou almost sang. “Not only that woman. As far as this matter is concerned, the problem cannot be decided according to the fate of any one person’s life. It is not the body that deserves our defense, but the soul. Those who become the servants of those four gain the immortal life of a vampire, but lose their human soul. Then night after night they prowl the precincts of this city, shameless monsters consuming their families, making even babies their prey. We should gladly sacrifice our lives in order to save such damned souls. If you will allow me to let the end justify the means, were some of our colleagues to lose their lives protecting that young woman, the news would surely make its way about the city. We could reasonably hope that in time, we would no longer be only residents of the Toyama housing project, but also citizens of Demon City.”

“This is Demon City, and you and I are already citizens of it.”

Yakou smiled. From the surrounding darkness somebody said, “Thank you.”

“Much appreciated,” somebody else agreed. They were both

heartfelt voices, dry and refined.

"Please forgive them for listening in. However, Aki-san, this is not something you need worry about. We shall answer the handsome doctor's call of our free will."

Setsura spun on his heels. "I'm sorry, but I have to get going. There's something I must attend to."

"Don't take it personally."

"I'll give you a ring later." To the two behind him he said:

Without regard for their own lives

they swore to expel the Hun

So five thousand in silver and sable

died in the barbarian dust

Their pitiful bones littering the banks

of an unknown river

While living on in their lovers' dreams

Setsura Aki recited the poem by Chen Tao with a melancholy air. "Everybody longs for death. This is a city where a human life is held cheap. Well, there's a mad scientist in Kabuki-cho who's always in the market for corpses."

Several minutes later, on the street leading to Meiji Dori where he'd tangled with Kikiou once before, he saw a patrol car parked on the road in front of him. The patrol car sported enough armor plating

to resist a direct hit from an RPG, and was coated with military-grade optically-reflective paint. Looking head on, the cowling of the air conditioning apparatus was easily discernable. The utilitarian style was favored by the mobile police commandos.

From the outside, the one-way glass appeared powder blue. The driver's side power window rolled down. White teeth flashed below a thick moustache. The smile of a hungry grizzly bear. His arm poked out of the window about the height of Setsura's thigh. His hand banged on the door panel.

"Hey, long time no see. Wanna ride?" Kusama's face looked more sunburned than usual.

Setsura grinned. "You on the job?"

"I was on my way to West Shinjuku anyway. I discovered this real interesting place smack dab in the middle of Kabuki-cho. The kind of place that literally takes a man at face value. You'd fit right in. I'll give you a lift—as long as you pick up the tab."

"So now you're picking up fares? My, how Shinjuku's men in blue have fallen." Setsura knitted his brows. "Sure, I'll take you up on that. There's something I wanted to run by you anyway."

"Fire away."

The back door opened. It was pockmarked with bullet holes, though thanks to the 20 mm armor plating none had penetrated more than a few fractions of an inch. "Everybody's a daredevil these days," Setsura grumbled to himself. He got in and closed the door.

The car took off. Kusama left the driving to his partner. He

twisted his big frame around and continued the conversation. “You look beat.”

“My part-time job’s taking over my life.”

“Yeah, that sucks. You can’t keep at this P.I. work forever. You gotta admit that running a *senbei* shop’s a waste of your talents. How ’bout shooting for Shinjuku’s number one gigolo or yakuza? Though you’d have to let me arrest you. No shit, get the credit for slapping the cuffs on Setsura Aki and a promotion would definitely be in the cards.”

Kusama grinned. The glittering barrel of the laser gun attached to his right wrist jutted out from his sleeve and swiveled around to focus on Setsura’s chest.

“And on top of that, no player in this town would mourn the loss of the competition. Hell, nobody’s going to feel sorry for you, not in this town. I’d make captain on the strength of public opinion alone.” With a hum, the barrel of the gun returned to its original position. “So, what did you want to ask me?”

Setsura leaned forward. “You’re on good terms with the Chief. Have you noticed anything odd about him lately?”

“Anything odd?” He raked his fingers through his beard and pushed out his lower lip. “Now that you mention it—I saw him this morning and he looked on top of the world. Could have fooled me. Weren’t there rumors going around he’d caught the clap?”

“Frankly, that’s a diagnosis I’d be happy to hear.” Setsura leaned back against the seat.

The patrol car wove through a line of traffic and jackrabbited off. Sporting a good-natured smile, Kusama jabbered on about this and that. About the time they were making a nonstop beeline down Yasukuni Avenue, he furrowed his brows and said, “Man, you really look like you’ve been taken to the cleaners. What do you want to drink?”

“Whatever’s fine.”

“It’s a curious joint. You don’t need me there to be there.”

“Hey, now’s not the time to suddenly become a cop who always plays by the rules.”

“Coffee, tea, cocoa, iron oolong, pu’er, and jasmine teas. Even Antarctic mineral water.”

“How about Alinamin?”

“Naw. They don’t carry energy drinks. But I’ve got a nutrition supplement just for us commando cops.”

“I’ll take one of those.”

“Got’cha.”

Kusama reached into his pocket with his ridiculously large hand and pulled out a cute-looking ampule and presented it to him. Setsura popped the cap off the long neck of the ampule and downed the contents in one gulp.

“How’s it taste?”

“Well, it’s definitely got a taste.”

Kusama threw out his chest and laughed. “And they say a guy as handsome as you can’t possibly have a sense of humor. Same with gigolos and mobsters. You should become a cop. It’d be my pleasure to run you through the gauntlet.”

“We’re here,” his partner announced.

Kusama stopped smiling. Straight ahead of them were the ruins of the Shinjuku Koma Theater. There was a parking lot in the plaza right off the lobby doors that opened onto Chuo Avenue. Here and there on a lot—that could accommodate a hundred cars—were little mountains of debris left over from the buildings that once stood there. There was a profit to be made from all the devastation.

The patrol car stopped. With Kusama taking the lead, the three of them set off on foot for Kabuki-cho’s red light district. A visitor could believe that the neon lights had never been extinguished since the district first sprang to life.

Scattered among the lounges and cabarets, the topless bars, peepshows and massage parlors, the opium dens and head shops were legit drug stores and fast-food joints lit up in more “healthy” electric lights.

The barkers mingled in with the crowds of pedestrians, on the prowl for fresh faces, the appearance of which would inevitably produce the equivalent of a full-blown brawl over the new meat.

Kusama plowed a path through the crowds like an ice breaker. One look at his uniform was enough to make the street hucksters and muscle-bound bouncers scamper for the sidelines.

Though regular beat cops patrolled the area at night, they did so in groups of ten, heavily armed with shotguns and compact RPGs, and with the full approval of the Shinjuku Police Department. Compared to them, the mobile commando cops were in a class by themselves, specializing in the "management" of murder, violence and mayhem.

Kusama stopped in front of an alley heading off the congested thoroughfare. "Ah, here we are," he said, pointing at a facade bathed in a pale red glow.

"Yeah, I know that place. Eddie's Bar. Up to half a month ago. But I heard he hadn't found a buyer yet."

"Hey, that means what we've got here is the one place Shinjuku's most famous P.I. doesn't know about." He grinned broadly and motioned with his chin.

From the front, the bar's facade was only a dozen feet wide. The sign above the door still read "Eddie's Bar."

"*Irasshai!*" A bewitching woman's voice rang out in the blue light. "Welcome!"

Shadows shifted and moved. Sweet perfume tickled Setsura's nose.

"I brought along Shinjuku's own dark knight, Mama. Time to pull out the stops."

"You don't say." A second figure in a kimono appeared from the blue haze. She bowed to Setsura. "My, my, my. Beholding him is enough to make me dizzy. The first time that's ever happened."

She was as seductively enchanting as she was innocently cherubic. She spoke this praise from the heart. A buxom woman wearing a western-style dress sidled up to her and examined the three men.

“What do you say, Mama? This one on the house like you promised?”

“Well—okay. Seeing that you’ve brought along such a fine-looking gentleman. Don’t be strangers, boys.”

A handsome man like Setsura frequenting the place would be the best advertising they could hope for. Setsura softly shook the white hand offered to him.

The mama-san closed her eyes and tipped her head. “Good heavens. One touch sends a thrill down my spine. Ah, and he stands there with that absent-minded look in his eyes. So, Mr. Clueless, what’s your technique?”

Setsura responded with a bewildered expression and laughed.

“This way—”

The woman in the dress motioned toward the back of the establishment. To the best of Setsura’s memory, it hadn’t changed at all since it was known as “Eddie’s.” Five patrons could squeeze in at

the bar, and there were tables and booth sets to seat only three couples. Those had been left behind by the previous owner. A bartender in a white shirt and bowtie stood behind the counter like a robot.

The mama-san brought over a whiskey on the rocks.

“You drink, don’t you?” she asked, sitting down on Setsura’s right.

“A taste now and then.”

“Nothing wrong with a little now and then.”

Setsura lightly pressed his lips against the rim of the brimming glass.

“Say, I didn’t know you were a light drinker,” said Kusama, who’d taken the woman in the dress for himself.

Setsura licked the whiskey off his lips, and took another drink.

This time he opened his mouth, and after giving it a moment of thought, took a deeper draught.

"Ah, here's a man with heart," exclaimed the mama-san as Setsura drained the glass.

"How was it?"

"Not to my taste."

"Eh?"

"At least I wouldn't serve up chocolate corn nuts as a side. *Senbei* is the only way to really enjoy a whiskey."

A long silence followed. Setsura cleared his throat. "Kusama-san, you said you'd found a great new bar. Sorry to say it, but this isn't it. What do you think?"

The two women looked at each other. "It's great because it's got such interesting things," said the woman in the dress.

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like this."

As she spoke, her appearance changed. Everything about her was the same—down to the hairstyle—except it was a much smaller porcelain figurine in a dress. A tiny pair of fangs glinted in her open mouth. The doll raised its head and sank them into Setsura's neck.

Setsura recoiled. The mama-san seized his hand. The wrist severed cleanly, turned into a doll's appendage and broke away. The pretty thing leapt through the air, landing behind the two commando cops. The eerily glowing eyes of the two toys glared at Setsura from

the top of the booth backrest.

The two cops jumped to their feet, astonished as their bodies froze in place. "*W-What the hell—*" gurgled Kusama. Given the pain and invisible wires, it was amazing he could speak at all.

"How long have you been hanging out with puppets?" Setsura asked. The utter lack of tension in his voice made the question all the more menacing. "Where is the puppet master?"

"*I—don't know—what you're talking—I—really—good bar with —*" Kusama frantically wrung the words out of his throat.

A silver light sliced through the blue gloom and cut through his devil wire. Setsura made for the door. The silver light came at him again, forked in midair, and continued on at the same speed until it crashed into the floor like a pair of Dobermans coming to the end of their leashes.

Setsura flung open the door. He stopped dead in his tracks. A gloomy blue light illuminated the narrow bar and tables. The interior of Eddie's Bar.

"You're trapped, Setsura." The voice of what had been Kusama reverberated from somewhere in the blue room. "This bar is sealed. Secret Chinese technology from four thousand years ago. Give it up. It's a crime not to do what the Master says."

Setsura searched for the source of the voice but couldn't find it. The strange blue haze muddled his sense of direction. He couldn't even locate the source of the light.

For now, his enemies consisted of the two men. Plus the "master"

and the china dolls. Setsura opened his right hand.

A gray object tumbled through the mist, hit the floor with a hard thump and rolled next to his feet. A metal tube the size of a large egg. A fuse smoldered.

Setsura covered his face with the sleeve of his slicker. This civilian-use device was not as powerful as a military-grade hand grenade. But at point-blank range the shock wave and shrapnel could take out three grown men. There was only one Setsura, not to mention the bomb was sitting there at his feet.

With a roar, the slicker flew upwards like paper trash caught in a stiff wind and crashed onto the floor a good yard away. Ruby-red beams pierced the motionless silhouette.

“Did we get him?”

“Got him.”

The question and answer came from the vicinity of the counter. A moment later Kusama and his partner grunted painfully. They stood up as if yanked forward, clutching their necks and shoulders. A leg buckled. A hand fell off. A thigh split halfway up like a ripe peach.

The wooden tables and the backs of the chairs cleaved apart without a sound, as if touched by an invisible psychic knife. The work of Setsura’s devil wires gliding silently through the air. Smooth as glass, the head of one dropped off. The other limped toward the door, dragging a leg spouting blood.

A single layer of skin held together Kusama’s shoulders. Blood gushed from both thighs. Dragging his foot out of the hole in the

floor dug by the grenade, he fixed his shining red eyes on the immobilized Setsura. Through the door spread out the city of Shinjuku.

Limping and staggering in the opposite direction from the red-light district, Kusama scrambled toward the vacant lot several blocks away. He rushed the razor wire dotted with “No Trespassing” signs. His big body convulsed and smoked. The fence was electrified as well.

The big man roared. Ignoring the violence to his body, he pressed himself against the wire. The chain links tore apart. He broke through.

Bathed in moonlight, black steeples soared skyward. Leaves rustled. A grove of trees, each fifteen to twenty feet high, twenty to thirty inches in diameter. A small wood in the middle of the entertainment district.

Another black shadow fell across the black land. An artist belonging to the extreme realism school would be overjoyed at the sight. The black trees had taken root in solid concrete.

Spurting fountains of blood, Kusama approached one tree and said, “All is as you ordered, Master. The other one is dead, but that is just as well.” Only the wind silently answered from the grove. The big, blood-spattered man spoke all the more earnestly. “That means I have you all to myself.”

After a long silence, a woman’s dazzling voice descended upon him. “Are you saying that Setsura is dead? Which one of your holes is spouting such nonsense?”

“No, I’m sure—”

“Then who is that standing there?”

Kusama turned toward the sound of something slicing through the air. A flash of silver light streaked from the treetops and was swallowed up in one corner of the chain link fence. A normal person could not have seen a thing in all the darkness, but even without night vision equipment, Kusama could see the most beautiful woman in the world standing there.

The silver comb arced toward his carotid artery. Setsura batted it away as he might a spinning top and calmly walked toward them.

“A slight blunder. But I couldn’t be happier, Setsura Aki. I will dispose of you before my Master’s eyes.”

The once friendly voice roiled with villainy and bloodlust as he greeted the approaching shadow.

“One more time.”

The silver comb burned through the air, skimmed Setsura’s neck, cartwheeled past him, turned back on its original course and was sucked back into the canopy of the tree it’d come from.

Setsura glanced at the collar of the slicker. “Cutting corners there, Mephisto,” he muttered, an attitude that might be considered ungrateful, considering that the slicker Mephisto had given him had protected him against laser beams and the shock and shrapnel of the grenade—even if the flash of the silver comb had carved a sizable notch in its collar.

“Back at the bar, this comb cut through my devil wires as well. From what Mephisto tells me, besides *Master* you also go by *Shuuran*.”

“Well, well. This is correct. The second most beautiful man on the planet knows my name. I am honored.”

“Are you here alone?”

“Aside from my servant, yes. Look what you’ve done to your friend. And then let him escape in order to find out where I was. That’s not very nice, you frighteningly beautiful man.”

“My friend is dead,” Setsura said softly. “What you see here is a hell beast that has assumed his appearance. I do him no favors by letting him live.”

Beneath the moonlight, three chimeras stood their ground. Only one should be human, and yet the demon vibes freezing the gloom were all far beyond the human.

At the same time, a figure wearing black Chinese robes appeared in front of the Aki Senbei shop in Yonchome, West Shinjuku. A small koto hung from his shoulder. The faint, fleeting sound floated on the passing breeze.

The koto called *Silent Night*.

Part Four: Monster Metamorphosis

Chapter One

"Where is *your* master?" Setsura asked, facing the tree. "It's about time we formally met. Her address and telephone number, please?"

"It is etched upon my heart," came Shuuran's voice amidst the rustling canopy of the dark tree. "If you want it, you must take it from me. Before the day dawns."

"Then that is what I will do." Setsura walked quietly to the tree.

Kusama stepped forward. "I'm still here," he growled like a wild animal. His fangs glittered.

"That is not necessary," said Shuuran.

A flash of silver cleanly severed Kusama's stout neck. His head popped up into the air, followed by a fountain of blood. Setsura didn't spare a second glance as his friend collapsed onto the ground. Instead he faced the treetops from which the silver comb had flown.

"These trees that spring from concrete are a natural treasure here in Shinjuku. They cannot be stripped bare of their leaves. Either you come down here or I will come up."

She didn't answer. Setsura felt a strange presence. Several of them. He glanced sideways at Kusama's corpse. A black substance like tar poured from his neck, spreading out in a growing puddle. Many small shapes and figures bobbed on the surface. Clay dolls.

“I used my own blood to start with,” Shuuran laughed in her high voice. “But having run out of useful things to do with your friend, his will do. Think of them as your kindred spirits.”

Before Setsura could dodge out of the way, the things born of living blood flew at him as one. Each mouth boasted a shiny pair of fangs. Unable to find any blood vessels, they had proved ineffective on Doctor Mephisto. But Setsura—

He could feel the thrall of excitement radiating from the treetops. The dolls paused with their fangs in his neck and cast their eyes at Shuuran’s face high above.

“Oh, look! The children are confused. That bite in the bar was effective after all.”

Setsura nonchalantly fastened the lapels of his coat.

“Ha! That makes my word your command.”

Her voice floated down from above. Several yards in front of him, a young woman in Chinese dress quietly alighted on the ground. She straightened, casting off beams of moonlight. Her arms were bare to the shoulders. She beckoned to him.

“Come.”

The bronze bracelet around her wrist sang out in a small, clear sound. As if a slave to her words, the beautiful, magical being called Setsura Aki stepped forward. Shuuran grinned from ear to ear. It was hard to imagine that such a refined and innocent countenance could take on such an appearance, even for a vampire.

Her glittering, fiery crimson eyes—her nostrils flaring with each ragged, panting breath—the greediest, most vulgar face in the world. She beckoned more forcefully.

Setsura walked straight towards her. Then he stopped, like a beautiful doll disobeying the yanked strings of his puppeteer. A look of consternation crossed Shuuran's face.

"As I might have expected. I have been alive for four thousand years and you still defy me. Princess curses you. Kikiou fears you. Now I understand. Sir Ryuuki is also in danger. Here and now I will sweep away every reason for their distress."

Shuuran proceeded forward, her right hand stretched out in front of her. She looked like a large cat on the prowl. Setsura didn't move, like a mouse frozen in place, as if he did not possess the means to escape those fangs and claws and resistance was useless.

A dark line appeared through the palm of Shuuran's hand, separating the bent barbs of her fingers down to the wrist. Then the line reached further, from her wrist to her elbow to her shoulder.

At the same time, the invisible brush drew similar dark lines across her throat and waist. Her hand split lengthwise like a stick of kindling struck by a sharp axe. Her neck and torso neatly bisected like sliced cucumber, the line spreading out like spilt ink.

But Shuuran continued on as if impervious, the fierce look of pain rising to her face only after passing through the hidden spider's web.

"I don't believe it—the threads—stretched there—" The words

emerged from her mouth in a bubbly, bloody froth.

"A cocoon," Setsura helpfully explained.

He'd spun it to protect his frozen body, the same way he had in the hospital to fend off the assault from Shuuran's master. The difference in effectiveness came down to the difference between master and servant. The exception being that in order to draw Shuuran closer, he had to feign obedience to her commands.

"And will you die like that?" The black-clad, half-human genie called Setsura addressed the lurching vampiress, a touch of compassion in his voice. "I do not believe so. But its effects will surely be felt. There are many things I wish to ask you. Why don't we go back to my shop and talk it over?"

"You beautiful, foolish man. I am not dead yet."

Shuuran pressed her split-apart hands against her throat and abdomen. They were sliding off each other like a stack of slippery plates. It wasn't necessary to note the tide of blood pouring out from between the sections to conclude she had been bisected where she stood. Trying to literally keep herself together, a wicked smile rose to the pitiful girl's mouth.

"Do you think nothing this bad has ever happened to me before? Do you think I've never died before? Four thousand years is a long time. Live and let die—die and let live. And as long as I live, I shall never obey you. You are the one who must obey me. Come—"

No matter how often she repeated herself, Setsura retreated instead, shaking free of the spell.

“You cannot resist me. You cannot escape.”

Painting thick ribbons of blood on the concrete, Shuuran pursued him. Even given her immortality, she exhibited a life force and implacable will that was stunning to behold. She chased him as Setsura glided backwards like a skater on smooth ice.

“Look, Sir Ryuuki,” said Shuuran, as if trying to convince herself. “I will eliminate the cause of your grief.”

Her blood-filled eyes observed as the black figure came to a halt. He stopped beneath the tallest of the trees.

“No, you cannot escape.” She drew up next to him. She was a big game hunter whose terrifying confidence never wavered while tracking down the prey.

A round lump no bigger than a baby’s head rolled up to her like a snowball. Shuuran stared at it, wide-eyed, as more appeared, one after the other, enclosing her in a kind of igloo.

“Tonight, the treasure of Kabuki-cho has proved very useful indeed,” Setsura mused profoundly. He juggled a white fruit plucked from the tree behind him in his right hand.

Shuuran stood immobilized on the spot, locked in. It was almost as if the “Tree of Kabuki-cho” had borne its fruit in anticipation of this day. Setsura had cast around the demon vampiress a wall of peaches, peaches that were said to extend the life of all living things and exorcise all impurities.

Yonchome in West Shinjuku. Fifty yards from a *senbei* shop—whose owner was as famous for his looks as his rice crackers—was a

small playground. Though a relatively safe location, come night, the roving demons would increase in number. However, if appropriately armed, it was not impossible for a person to enjoy the cool of the evening.

One such man noticed the impressive figure sitting on one of the park benches. His eyes were drawn to the odd object this person was holding. A small koto. This musical instrument alone was enough to prompt him to summon the rest of the civilian patrol. They surrounded the bench.

Tied in a topknot, his long hair hung down to his shoulders. A healthy-looking Chinese man with pale skin. The patrolmen felt cold chills run down their spines. For no particular reason, they sensed this was a recent resident of Demon City.

“G’night. Sure is hot, huh?”

“That a koto?”

“Can’t sleep either? We’re with you on that. Hey, why don’t you play us a tune?”

For a minute, the man didn’t move or speak. Then he applied his fingers to the strings. The civilian patrol reacted with applause and shouts of approval. His melancholy voice drifted up into air bathed in moonlight. It wasn’t a melody they knew.

He played a song and sang about a faraway place, about an old regime even father time had forgotten, at the ends of an earth whose life and death the gods of history didn’t know.

On a clear summer night, in a corner of a small park, they saw the

endless, auburn steppes. They heard the songs sung by soldiers under starry skies. Lights came on in the windows of the houses adjacent to the park. Front doors opened. Young and old faces alike crossed the street to the park and formed a ring around the bench.

The thunder of horses galloping across the land. The swords of the royal army clanging against the spears of the Hun. The fighting began at daybreak and ended with the sunset. Over and over again.

On days when the rain turned the desert to a sea of mud. On days when the winds carved the dunes surrounding the encampments into the ruins of a strange land. Thousands of soldiers ate snow as they froze to death. Tens of thousands hallucinated about their humble hometowns while dying of thirst in the scorching heat.

Nobody knew when the battle had started. Nobody knew when it would end. Not the men who fought and not the men who sent them to fight. Fighting was the only proof left of being alive. And soon not even that was sufficient.

One day, wounded, he waited in the middle of the desert for death to arrive. Dozens of cavalry faced armies of five hundred and more. Having repulsed them once, he ordered his still-living subordinates to retreat, leaving himself alone to hold this ground.

Dozens of arrows protruded from his body. Blood spurted from the breastplate of his armor. His officers barricaded in the fortress wept for him. He was the highest ranked of Emperor Zheng's generals. Yet while praising his wisdom and bravery to the heavens, he'd been exiled to these distant lands. And yet he'd fought all the more valiantly.

Then the clouds of dust ahead of him took on the appearance—not of the Hun—but of a small group of men and women. He believed that his destiny was finally at hand.

The sound of the koto ceased. His audience stood transfixed. The lyrics and the melody burrowed into their souls. They each felt as if they had come to the end of a long journey.

They were about to applaud when they realized the musician wasn't there anymore. The bench was empty except for a few grains of sand blown by the wind and glittering beneath the moon.

They all could believe he'd returned for good to the scene of that battle.

Setsura Aki stood at the entranceway to the park. The night wind rippled the sleeves of his slicker. His clear black eyes beheld the kind of moon that must have shone over the western Chinese steppes.

A shadow emerged from the darkness of the park and the light of the moon. He stood in front of Setsura.

"That was a nice song."

"At least nobody covered their ears."

"General Ryuuki. The first among equals of Emperor Zheng's generals. I never imagined we would meet."

"That is such an old name. I would be rid of it but Princess insists."

They strolled down the night-lit street. Setsura said, "It's not

much, but I can offer you *senbei* and tea."

Ryuuki flashed a relaxed smile. "You are the first outsider to make such an offer since Princess rescued me. I am grateful."

"More importantly, a guest of mine incurred your Princess's anger and is in the hospital as a result. I'd like to meet her and ask that she at least cover the bill."

"That would be the end of us. Not that I would necessarily object, but it would be impossible for me to utter the words if I so chose."

"Indeed." Setsura added in a sad voice, "I guess all I can do is ask."

"It is impossible. It must be against God's will. Incidentally, how did you sustain that wound to your hand?"

"Ah, yes." Setsura grinned sheepishly. "I grabbed hold of something I shouldn't have. But I concluded one task in the process. And there is one more—"

The most beautiful melody in the world rang out. "It is called *Silent Night*. That night we met, this is the instrument that put you and the Doctor to sleep." Ryuuki continued as Setsura backed quickly away from him, "It looks like you and I are doomed to fight in any case. One note from *Silent Night* will send you into a sound sleep. It is already too late for you to escape."

The wind ceased. A black cat observing them from a nearby hedge fell like a loaf of bread onto the ground and began to snore. In all the houses within earshot of the koto, human activity ceased.

The frightening power of the ghost koto. The moon grew forgetful of its own light, slipping into a thick haze. The eyelids grew heavy. This koto could even cause a nuclear reactor to slumber. It was only natural that Setsura would fall to the ground on one knee.

"Princess said not to make you one of our own."

Ryuuki couldn't hide the fatigue in his voice. He hung the koto from his shoulder and slowly reached out his hand. "I do not understand Princess's feelings toward you, but I do not question her word. You should be thankful to conclude a life that will not go on forever."

He released his *qi*. But in the moment it left his hand, the energy reversed direction and struck the upper half of his body. His hand and wrist pointed at himself. The unseen pain was the handiwork of an unforeseen power. The cold, debilitating shock knocked the breath from his lungs and threw him to the ground.

A black-clad shadow stood unsteadily before him. "That night, while Mephisto and I slept, the patient moved freely. Don't I look like one of you?"

Ryuuki's eyes colored with excruciating pain and cast out a beam of fierce light. "You've been bitten?"

Setsura opened the collar of his slicker, revealing the two marks on the left side of his neck. "Sorry to say so, but this is the work of a vampire doll in a curious little bar. Luckily, just the tips of its fangs. Is that puppet master someone you are close to?"

“What happened to Shuuran?” Ryuuki frantically raised his head.

“Oh, she’s not dead. I checked her into Mephisto Hospital. That’s why I was late getting home. You really should join her. A *qi* powerful enough to kill me has got to smart, even for a vampire.”

Ryuuki grunted and reached out his hand. The burst of invisible, odorless energy faded away almost at once. At the same time, another blow rattled him down to his bones. Ryuuki threw in the towel.

Looking down at the twitching body, Setsura said, “I’ve caught two so far, and all I’ve got to show for it is two big pains in the neck.”

There wasn’t a hint of victory in his voice. Instead, a rather surprised look of dismay on his face.

Chapter Two

The director of Mephisto Hospital wasn't one to brood. Illnesses were diagnosed and treated with the same precision and the same warm, relaxed smile. And the patients certainly voiced no complaints about the services delivered.

Things went on as they always did.

However, when the hospital director grew so distant that he seemed beyond the pain and suffering of his patients, even the children said aloud, "He's scary."

The adults agreed. "Something's on the good Doctor's mind today," they gossiped under their breaths.

In fact, Mephisto found himself in a state of mind that simply should not exist. He was *concerned*. Standing in front of the big desk in his office, he shut his long, narrow eyes and drew together his arched eyebrows as he worked toward a decision.

The face of the receptionist floated into view. By the time Setsura and the other man appeared next to her, Doctor Mephisto had made up his mind. A few minutes later, the three of them were sitting on the sofa in his office reserved for guests. The sound of running water could be heard in the background.

"Two in one night?" Mephisto pointed out with no little irony, "You aren't so lucky as you are possessed."

"Got that right," Setsura said shortly. "It's all straight downhill

after this. Share and share alike, I thought."

Mephisto looked at Ryuuki, sitting rigidly in the chair. "It was the same with that girl. Is there anything those filaments of yours can't do?"

"Well, turn the screws too tightly and they'll just croak. Then it'd be old school all the way. A stake through the heart. Cremation. Submerged in running water. But there's no telling how effective any of these methods would be. Beheading is the simplest. Still, it'd be better to find some straightforward way to make them sing. Say, employing Doctor Mephisto's charms and powers."

Setsura steeled himself for a comeback. Mephisto turned to Ryuuki instead. "This one looks like he's ready to talk."

Setsura shot a look at Mephisto. Mephisto's face appeared underlain with mother-of-pearl. "Well, I'll leave it up to you then. By the way, how is Miss Kanan doing?"

"You didn't ask earlier, so I thought perhaps you'd come bearing gifts, prepared to make amends. She's not here. She's in an undisclosed location being cared for by Yakou. A number of his tougher underlings are manning the checkpoints."

Setsura said pointedly, "Whether it's the vampire who sniffs out the victim, or the victim who draws in the vampire, there isn't much point in hiding her."

He was still miffed about Mephisto bringing Yakou and company on as guards, knowing they would be powerless against a frontal assault.

Unfazed, Mephisto retorted, “A doctor has the responsibility to take every step possible to insure the safety of his patients. I allow myself no exception to that rule.”

“Where is she?”

Mephisto directed his attention back to Ryuuki. “I don’t suppose it’d hurt to ask. Leave a note with the secretary.”

“Fine. I get it. What about her mom?”

“*Mom*. A word that conveys more intimacy than simple filial attachment. But it suggests no qualities that could help such a person in such a condition. She possesses superficial learning she mistakes for intelligence, like the hog that boasts a knowledge of agronomy because of the farmer’s tag in its ear. Anybody other than a relative would have assumed the girl had been misplaced from the morgue. But if you insist, I will lead the way and hand over the key.”

Setsura jabbed a pale finger at the tip of Mephisto’s nose. “You know, I half agree with that sentiment. But let’s give it an honest shot and see what happens. You want to draw lines in the sand, well, there’s one right here. I’ll happily shred the place to microscopic dust for the trouble.”

Mephisto looked hard at that finger and then pulled away. “Such hotheadedness is a side of you I haven’t seen before. Could I inquire as to the reason for this burst of stubborn passion?”

“A mother came searching for her daughter. In this city, anybody looking for somebody is my client.”

“So we’re all brothers and sisters under the skin, eh? Spare me

the sanctimony. Reserve it for that *you* that isn't you."

"For the time being, you'll have to settle for the *me* that is me," Setsura said, his voice and face as impassive as always. Then with a wink he headed for the door, and left the room without so much as a backward glance.

Mephisto stood in front of Ryuuki and rubbed the back of his neck. Then he brought his glistening lips close to Ryuuki's ear. "Turning your own *qi* back on you—that was a dirty trick. That man—however handsome he appears on the outside—is the very personification of Demon City. His single failing is that he is a lousy judge of character."

Ryuuki wasn't any more "out of it" than before. Setsura had employed his devil wires simply in order to transport him here. They were still entwined around him. Though his entire body was a limp mass, his head jerked around quite quickly. His eyes bored into Mephisto's, burning with naked animosity.

Affecting a cool manner as he eyed the profile of this wrought-iron man, Mephisto asked blandly, "Can you stand up? If so, I'll remove these filaments. Your hair and the rest of you is a bit unkempt. You may use the washroom back there. I'll put out a change of clothes."

Ryuuki glowered. "Whatever you are scheming, I am pledged to fight until you are destroyed."

"I have nothing but admiration for such fighting spirits. But a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. No need for such extraordinary measures in order to take a bath, is there? I will

not force you to do anything, and shall communicate whatever plans or schemes I have on my mind to you forthrightly."

"And what would those be?"

"How about you enjoy that bath first? That glow you see around the skylight is moonlight. It will stay like that twenty-four seven. The perfect environment for a person like you, wouldn't you say? To be sure, you will be limited to this office area, and I cannot do much about the ambience or interior decor."

Ryuuki looked up at Mephisto. The fierce glare in his eye cast invisible sparks into the air. "I shall take you up on your offer."

"Then you are as wise a general as you are brave. Well, then—"

Mephisto reached inside his cape with both hands. He presented his right hand. Inside his fist were several straight, gleaming objects. He opened his hand. They flew into the air and assembled themselves into the skeleton of a golden bat. It alighted on Ryuuki's shoulder and brought its face close to the nape of his neck.

Ping! came a pleasant, chime-like sound. Mephisto said, "A bat that bites a vampire. What do you think of that?"

Ryuuki got unsteadily to his feet. Mephisto gestured toward the other end of the room with his alabaster arms. "The bathroom is there. Take all the time you need."

The man tried to cut away the gloom. He tore it in half and in half again. Another half and another, over and over, mindlessly, to the point of madness. The darkness blanketing Demon City was total and complete. And so another half, and another—all that he needed

right now.

He reached out with his arms and legs, stretching out on the dark floor. He was content as long as he had the space he needed. He was wearing a suit. Expensive, tailor-made. The price came to three months of his regular salary.

He hadn't suddenly become a spendthrift. It'd come with a package of mid-year *obon* gifts. The sender surely could not have imagined it ever being worn in a place like this, below the edge of darkness.

He opened his eyes. Realizing where he was, he began crawling across the ground like a centipede or lizard. When he got to the patio, his wife was waiting there in a kimono.

"Are you awake?"

The moonlight illuminated his wife's face, making it look even whiter and more beautiful and famished than usual. He brushed away the dirt and cobwebs and followed her into the kitchen.

Two of his children were seated at the table. The older daughter was in her second year in high school. The younger was in her first. Their parents thought them both very accomplished girls, capable of making it into Japan's Ivy Leagues.

Not that it mattered now. They served other purposes. They lived for their parents. Literally.

"Well," he said, turning his burning eyes on them. "It is time to eat."

The girls tensed up, each clapping a hand to her neck. “No, it hurts.” Compared to their mother and father, their faces were far more ashen.

Tears glistened in his older daughter’s eyes. “Yeah, it really hurts. I don’t want to anymore.”

“What are you mouthing off about?” Her mother pushed back her chair and stood up. Perhaps she was hungrier than he. Perhaps her temper was shorter.

The older daughter bolted from the table toward the living room. Her mother grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and yanked her backwards. The girl let out a scream. Her sister buried her face in her hands.

The mother sank her fangs into her daughter’s neck. She shrieked. It must really hurt. There was no telling how many more times they could keep this up. After that, he wasn’t sure how long they could preserve such delicious prey as his remaining son and daughter.

Frankly, he’d be fine with getting it over and done with and turning them in one fell swoop. His wife was the one who objected. He’d gotten tired of listening to her going on about wanting to taste their children’s blood.

Mustering the minimally necessary amount of fatherly affection, he gently laid his hand on his son’s shoulder. The child stiffened and tightly closed his eyes.

Tominori Nagai, Shinjuku’s deputy mayor, settled down for

breakfast.

Chapter Three

Setsura woke with an aching throat. It wasn't a piercing pain. More like the dull ache that came with a minor strep infection. He didn't have a fever. Wondering if this was just his imagination, he brought his hand up to his neck and placed it over his artery.

A slight chill seeped into his fingertips. It was spreading, radiating from the two protuberances—he couldn't tell whether they were cold or not—the two bite marks. The surrounding flesh was swollen and tender.

He pulled his fingers away and got up. He was in the back office of Aki Detective Agency.

The morning light slowly crept across the old "*senbei*" futon—a comforter that had lost most of its stuffing and thus had come to resemble a *senbei* cracker—spread over the tatami mats. Most appropriate bedding for this young *senbei* shop owner.

Stepping into the shop, he saw that his part-timer had arrived. She still didn't know what exactly had gone on several days before—the battle between Ryuuki and Setsura in the back of the shop. She was only an eyewitness to the results. She'd accompanied him to the hospital and then came to work the next day as if nothing was amiss.

She was, after all, a citizen of Demon City.

"Good morning!" The cheer directed at him was rather forced.

“What’s up?” Setsura asked, rubbing his neck.

“You’re looking a bit gray. You were pretty green around the gills yesterday. But compared to today, you were the epitome of health.”

“Bad night.”

“Even for a bad night—” She didn’t finish the thought, but gazed at him, her moist eyes tinged with peril. She swallowed hard and said, “Boss—maybe you should use a little rouge—”

“Give me a break. I’m not into that.”

“It’d put some color in your cheeks. Might even look a little sexy. Then again, touch up your lips and cheeks and, well, I don’t think I could stand it.”

“Pull yourself together.” Setsura gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

The muscles beneath his hand twitched and she let loose a small, surprised shriek. A second later, her eyes returned to normal. “No. Sorry. I don’t know why I did that.”

She looked stricken. Setsura smiled nonchalantly. “That’s okay. How’s the merchandise? Running short on anything?”

“Not at all. There’s plenty on hand. We’ve got plenty to tide us over in any case. I made sure to put anything in short supply on backorder.”

“You’re a life-saver.”

“Oh, we are short of the lightly-browned variety. You have to cook those yourself. We could be running out by noon.”

The prized product of Aki Senbei, made by the proprietor himself.

"Seems it's been that way for a while," said the girl, glancing away from Setsura as he inspected the display cases with tired eyes. "How about we rebuild the lot next door and design it so people can watch you making them? It'd be a hit for sure. Do that and we'd move enough product to justify adding another three employees at least."

"Oh, you'll handle everything fine by yourself."

"Happy to hear that." She crossed her arms across her ample breasts. "But I think that's what we've got to do to grow sales. Simply staying put with the same signage, living off our established reputation won't generate any excitement."

"I didn't realize you were so ambitious."

"I'm a businesswoman," she boasted, throwing out her chest for emphasis. "I've been attending night school, planning how to take on a management role."

"I'm impressed." Setsura allowed himself a small smile.

"So you'll consider my idea?" she asked with undisguised zeal.

"Sure."

"Great. I'm committed to seeing this thing through."

"But we'll have to put the lightly browned *senbei* on hold for today. There are things I've got to get done."

"Your customers won't be happy. I'm the one they end up

complaining to."

"Well, that's business for you. Stiff upper lip and all."

The girl shrugged. "It's the middle of summer, so why are you wearing that black slicker?"

"I was born wearing it."

Having finished checking out the merchandise, Setsura nodded and left. According to the clock in the office, it was a few minutes before nine o'clock in the morning.

The street was flooded with noise and light. The sound of shoes on pavement as the salarymen hurried off to work. The sound of shop shutters being opened. The hum of the bakery's high-voltage goblin bug zapper. The rumble of gasoline engines and the drone of hybrid gas-turbines.

Here and there people greeted each other. "Morning. Nice weather, isn't it? Where're you off to, dressed up like that?"

"The Hanazono Temple flea market. I'm hoping to catch up on the latest methods for exorcising evil spirits."

"My boy's entrance exams are coming up. I'm hoping he can attend a summer school outside Shinjuku."

Every sound, every word dripped with sweat. Despite the morning hour, the temperature was already in the nineties. And yet Setsura felt his body cooling down. Gooseflesh stood out on his skin. The chill seeped into his bones, down to the marrow.

He felt dizzy. He had to brace his legs to keep his balance. Only a

dozen minutes had elapsed since he left the shop. If he only had to put up with the occasional fits of shivering, that'd be one thing. He was still feeling Ryuuki's *qi* like a fist in his gut.

Steeling himself, the sunlight battering him as if plunging through a raging waterfall, Setsura Aki slowly made his way back to the shop. He dodged the shopgirl, who reached up as if to feel his forehead for a fever, and staggered to the back office.

As soon as he stepped inside, the dizziness vanished. Walking down the hallway, the chills and shivering ceased. But reaching the office, his hand froze on the sliding screen door.

A nasty electronic shock ran down his arm. The tatami mats in the office glowed with sunlight. He'd been bitten by one of Shuuran's dolls. The scars in his throat were like a pair of nails driven into the skin. However—

"What a bloody pain in the neck," he grumbled to himself. As nonchalant as he was handsome, he permitted himself no air of resignation or despair.

"Boss—" came the shopgirl's voice behind him. She sounded nervous.

"What's up?"

"I forgot to ask you. Can I take tomorrow off?"

"No problem. Why?"

"I've got a—date."

"Hmm. And tomorrow's not Sunday." He asked, "A fellow

college student?”

“No. He works for the city.”

“Ah. So he’s a real salaryman.”

“Yeah, I think.”

“I understand. Sure, we’ll call it a paid holiday.”

“Thanks! That really helps.” She turned her attention to a customer entering the store. “*Come in!*” she called out in her lively shopgirl voice.

Setsura went into the office. He’d left Shuuran in Mephisto’s care. Being bit by her doll had left him susceptible to her manipulations. Their battle in the vacant lot made that clear. As long as he was beyond the sound of her voice and the glow of her eyes, given the state of his wound, he should be beyond her remote control.

Just to be sure, he’d told Mephisto to keep her sedated with powerful non-hallucinatory narcotics, but there was no telling whether Mephisto would take his advice without knowing why. He had to come up with a Plan B, just in case.

Setsura wore a pair of sunglasses out of the house. He took the bus to the Shinjuku Station west terminal, where he transferred to a different line. No matter what manner of mass transit, the attention of the female passengers focused on his comely face and black coat.

Somebody wearing a coat in the middle of summer in *this* city wasn’t all that out of the ordinary. But the way these women were

reacting to him wasn't the same. Though he was accustomed to the entranced expressions, the colors in those moist eyes deepened similarly to his shopgirl's.

The color of desire.

The mechanical voice over the loudspeaker announced: "*Next stop Magic Town. Next stop Magic Town*."

Feeling the sighs of regret at his back, Setsura got off the bus and set off at a brisk walk, tolerating the feverish chills seeping into his bones the best he could.

Located in the first block of the Takada no Baba neighborhood, Magic Town squatted there quietly beneath the bright sunlight. At this time of day, any angels or demons living there kept out of sight.

Belfries and overhanging gables adorned the stone houses and buildings. It was reminiscent of something out of the Middle Ages. The old wooden doors and windows were shuttered tight. The water coursing down the covered ditches on either side of the smooth cobblestone streets still ran clear.

Though witches and warlocks preferred the nighttime, others were awake and watching during the day. A certain *something* was there, obstructing the evil designs of the gangbangers, cat burglars, organized crime syndicates and intelligence agencies who entered this city block in search of forbidden mysteries. Its small eyes glittered from atop the dark alleyways and the weathered brick walls.

Setsura glanced to his right and left. On his right, the twisted trunk of a tree clawed toward the sky. A willow. Its roots were covered with human bones. These were the accumulated results of people who'd been dumped there. From the tattered remains of the clothing, interlopers from some time ago.

Setsura had no interest in them.

On his left was a brick wall. Draped across the top of the wall was a black shadow. A round, fat black cat.

"Freelancing again, Toya?" Setsura asked, calling out the name of the most rotund information broker in Shinjuku.

The cat scowled and disappeared behind the wall and out of view. An unfamiliar noise rushed toward him. It sounded like the roar of the ocean. A white, surging tide sprang into view at the end of the street.

"Well—" said Setsura in a tired voice.

The ocean wave rushed at him, sparkling in the sunlight. He had no time to escape and nowhere to run. He stood there and was engulfed in white.

A moment later, he was standing alone on the cobblestones, the crash of the waves still echoing in his ears. That was all. Not a spot of wetness remained on the street. There wasn't a damp hair on his head.

"Interesting guest," came a hoarse voice above him.

Setsura looked up. The owner of the voice alit on the limb of the

willow. Its carnivorous eyes peered down at him. A raven.

"People who visit during the day, who don't have an appointment, will trip that tripwire. Those who intend no harm to this city block or its residents won't get much more than a good scare or a fainting spell. That bunch from the Czech Secret Service, though, they scared easy." The raven jabbed its beak at the tangled skeletons around the base of the tree. "The muddy currents swallowed them up and they drowned there. Much to the delight of the neighborhood dogs and rats."

"Good job," Setsura complimented the bird while suppressing the creeping chill in his gut. "By the way, any other tripwires?"

"That depends on you. A brave heart, not alarmed by that little performance—you don't strike me as a dangerous type. Where are you headed?"

"Show me the way and I'll tell you."

The bird opened its mouth and cawed like a normal bird. Then it said, "These days, you can't let down your guard even for ordinary citizens," and took off.

Beating its wings vigorously, it crossed the sky above the street. A dozen feet ahead of him, it paused and looked back at him.

"The house of Miss Galeen Nuvenberg, if you don't mind."

Giving no sign whether it comprehended him or not, the bird resumed its forward flight and continued leisurely down the narrow main street.

Chapter Four

A girl of seven or eight with golden locks greeted Setsura at the door of the small stone house.

The combination of the pink gloss of her skin, eyes reminiscent of the clear blue sea, and the purple satin dress was so endearing as to drive the most austere man to thoughts of abduction. At the same time, she had about her an ethereal, detached essence that calmed the animal spirits.

“It’s been a long time,” Setsura smiled.

“Welcome,” she said with a bow. The golden wave of hair swayed on top of her head.

She gestured for him to come in. The black bird followed after them and alighted on the hearth above the fireplace. The girl didn’t object. The air was cool. The floor and walls and ceiling were made of stone. The light shining through the windows was filled with the cold clarity of a winter sun.

She offered him one of the chairs around the wooden table. “I’m sorry, but all I have is tea. Grandmother is in the hospital.”

“Yes, I know. Right now, she can’t move a muscle. I came here to ask you something.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you have any fears of being overheard?”

“There is nothing to worry about.” She followed Setsura’s gaze. “I’ve been observing you since you left the bus stop. I sent it to meet you.”

The bird held a wing in front of its beak and cleared its throat with a self-important air.

“I’m not sure that feeding a raven’s ego is a wise thing to do.”

“I agree,” said the girl, returning the bird’s look. The black bird turned the other way in a huff.

“I’m sorry, but could you draw the curtains?”

“Haven’t you just woken up?” With a soft, metallic click, her lips turned up in a smile. She was a doll.

Setsura looked over his shoulder. The curtains were drawn across the window. The room was dark. The brass lamp fixture in the ceiling cast off a dull light. He retraced his thoughts. Had it been like this all along? Without another word, with his left hand he turned down the collar of his shirt.

“This is what it comes down to.”

“I know.”

“Can it be treated?”

“The extent of the wound must be ascertained. It will take time—and will not be painless.”

“I’m fine until sundown.”

“That will do,” the girl said, closing her eyes and nodding in a

manner that suggested a thorough knowledge of the subtleties of human existence.

"Strange things have been happening of late outside the neighborhood," said the raven in a papery voice. It was still perched on the hearth. "I thought perhaps—and then it became quite obvious—it must be *them*."

"Strange things?" Setsura queried, feigning ignorance.

"Yes. I see the unseen flying through the sky. I hear the unheard. Humans don't understand how to use their eyes or ears."

"That's the kind of thing Grandma likes to say," the girl grinned.

The bird ignored her. "One night, I watched a woman go into a house in Yocho. Half an hour or so later, she came out with a man. He had marks on his throat like yours."

"I didn't know you were a peeping tom. When Grandma gets better, she'll have to gouge out one of your eyes to teach you a lesson."

Setsura asked, "Why were you observing that house?"

"It's the house of the Chief of Police. They toss out the most delicious leftovers in the trash."

"And what happened after that?"

"You really want to know?"

"Sure."

"It'll cost you."

“Spell out your terms.”

“Let me think about it,” the bird said curtly. “But more importantly, let’s not delay treatment. What I saw was barely a scratch, but I could tell the curse was already coursing through his bloodstream.”

“Good idea,” the girl nodded. “This way.”

Setsura got to his feet. She led him down a narrow hallway to a room further in. She pushed on a steel door set into the stone wall on his right. The heads of large rivets dotted the rusty red surface. The long-unused hinges groaned as the door opened inwards, exposing a dark, rectangular space.

The illumination from the hallway revealed a stone staircase. “Come along,” the girl said.

“What about a light?”

“I have it here.” She held up the silver candlestick holder.

The blue candle cast off a wan glow. The melting wax dribbled down and wound around the silver shaft of the holder. Without a moment’s hesitation, the girl disappeared into the darkness. Setsura chased after the small halo of light.

“Have you been to the hospital?” he asked, as they plunged deeper down into the chilly gloom.

“Yes. Yesterday evening. Doctor Mephisto said you had just left.”

“And how is she doing?”

A faint smile bubbled to the girl's lips. The gap between the substance of the question and Setsura's voice must have struck her as odd. Whatever pressure he was working under, he sounded like he was pretty out of it. To put things baldly, like he'd stumbled out of bed. Considering the state he was in, this said a lot about what the "normal" him was like.

"I couldn't say. But if he comes up with an effective treatment, you ought to try some too."

Setsura stood next to the girl. He didn't know how far they'd descended. Based on the length of their conversation, more than ten seconds couldn't have elapsed. But they'd walked down more than a hundred steps.

The faint halo of light revealed a subterranean scene entirely appropriate to this neighborhood and this house. The black stone arch holding up the ceiling, the stone sarcophagus resting on the stone floor—Setsura could make out similar objects residing in the chambers bored into the far wall.

"Over here," the girl beckoned.

"An underground graveyard," Setsura said, making note of vases inlaid with gold and silver tucked into holes in the arch.

"Yes."

"And the contents of those vases would be—?"

"Yes. Hearts."

"Whose?"

“I do not know. I suppose they belong to Grandma and me. Can you see well enough?”

“More or less.”

“And where it’s pitch black?”

“Less. The candle helps.”

“My hands have been empty for some time now.”

The girl was suddenly right in front of him. She pushed on a steel door. A beam of dim light cast a blue glow across Setsura’s face. The light burning inside the room wasn’t likely an ordinary incandescent bulb.

“You use this room often?”

“What makes you think that?”

“The hinges didn’t creak.”

“I treat people now and then. People with the same illness as you. Not all of the residents of the Toyama housing project are blessed with sufficient self-control. Even there, none of the victims had become a vampire irreparably. They are all recuperating in their homes.”

“You have that effective a cure?”

The girl didn’t answer. She pointed at the bed that stretched toward the back of the rather large room. “Wait there while I prepare for the examination and treatment. Based on your ability to see what should not be visible, your transformation has already progressed to a significant degree. Still, the wound seems fairly shallow.”

“Her sire is a four-thousand-year-old vampire.”

“That being the case—” Her tone of voice suggested she didn’t disagree with the relevancy of the observation. She walked to the wall on her right where an array of strange metal instruments was hanging.

Setsura sat down on the bed. It was hard as stone but had the necessary amount of give. The blankets were folded up at his feet.

Kii—kii—squealed the wheels of a cart the girl pushed up to the bed. An odd device sat on the cart. “Lie down,” she said. Setsura complied. “Turn your head. I will examine the wounds.”

A mechanism consisting of a cylinder and squarish object. Clear plastic tubes coiled around it like snakes. Here and there knobs and valves poked out at odd angles. It looked like an antique contraption from a long-gone, steam-powered era.

“Why didn’t you check yourself into Mephisto Hospital?” she asked, picking up a tube capped at one end with a needle-like, tapered metal ring.

“Let’s just say something doesn’t feel right.”

“Such as?”

“Such as that hospital director having an odd air about him, like he’s being torn by internal struggles.”

“You don’t say—”

Setsura felt the metal ring pressing against the wounds in his neck. “The son-of-a-bitch visited the vampire’s lair. Stuff must have

happened there."

He was the only person on the face of the earth who referred to the Demon Physician as a "son-of-a-bitch," though that didn't make his soul any more transparent.

"Was his blood taken?" The frightening possibilities of the question did not at all match the look on the doll's face.

"I don't get how doctors think at all. That quack in particular."

"You do have a point." She withdrew the "needle" from the pair of wounds.

"How is it?" Setsura asked, rubbing his neck.

"How is your appetite?" The tube she was holding had turned black. Setsura's blood.

"I don't have one right now."

"Did you eat last night."

"Yeah."

"Trouble sleeping?"

"No."

"Dry throat?"

"A little."

"Anything you want to drink? Be honest."

"Nope."

"What's your reaction when exposed to sunlight?"

“I get cold.”

“How cold?”

“Goose pimples.”

“You should have come here earlier.”

“Is it too late?” Setsura asked impatiently.

“No. There should still be time.”

“So you can treat me?”

“No.”

In response to this matter-of-fact statement, Setsura stared off into space.

“Please don’t give up hope. At the end of the day, there is no cure for somebody whose blood has been taken by a vampire. If they want to return to their human state, they must destroy the vampire that drank their blood. However, if the vampire loses interest after that, the victim can continue to maintain her humanity and go on living in…in proportion to the number of times her blood was taken.”

“So a person takes on more of a vampire’s characteristics if his blood is drunk twice rather than once, three times rather than twice —”

“Yes. That’s the gist of it. Though simply judging the degree of transformation according to the frequency and volume, it is possible to wrongly conclude that transfusions and the administration of antitoxins could bring about recovery. This bit of blind faith sprang up in Europe during the Middle Ages and still carries considerable

weight. It is a fundamental error. In purely substantive terms, vampirism itself cannot be cured. A victim becoming a creature of the night all depends on the degree of the curse they bear."

Setsura forgot about the severity of his own physical condition and focused his attention on the lecturing doll. The countenance of the striking young woman took on the grave demeanor of a professor.

Setsura said, "But according to Mephisto, some time ago, vampires came to Shinjuku that were not members of the Toyama clans. Fortunately, they were stopped before the victim transformed into a vampire. All the blood in her body was drained and transfused, and she now leads a normal life."

"As close to normal as can be expected. I am also aware of that incident. The victim was the wife of a Naitomachi teahouse owner. Even now, she eats half of what she used to. She gets chills during the day and cannot bear the sunlight for more than thirty minutes. Even when she is in the store, she stays at the far back with the lights turned off. Her friends and acquaintances have dwindled over the years."

"And why would that be?"

"Whenever customers with healthy complexions showed up, those frightening eyes would peer at them from the gloom."

"No surprise then."

"The vampire who bit her ran off and was never heard from again. He probably didn't take a liking to her blood. Until that vampire is destroyed, she will remain as she is. She will likely live another

thirty or so years longer than the normal person. Though if she drank blood, she could extend her lifespan far longer. As long as somebody else didn't stake her."

"Have her symptoms worsened since then?"

"As far as I know, they have. Until she passes, there are bound to be people spreading rumors about. *We all know Grandma is a good person, but I'd swear neighborhood kids are showing up with scars on their necks*. But those rumors have only emerged after a half-dozen decades or so."

"What becomes of children who are bitten?" Setsura couldn't help imagining an old lady basking on a balcony in the sun, rivulets of fresh blood spilling from her mouth.

"We are not talking about symptoms so obvious. She would become more susceptible to sunstroke. She would remain always a pseudo-vampire. And when she died, her body would return to its normal state."

"Does that mean that after seven or eight years, I'll be lusting after the blood of young women?"

She touched her fingers to her attractive lips. "Just between you and me, but they'd be lined up around the block."

"I suppose that's something to look forward to. However—"

The girl nodded. She pulled on one of the knobs and pushed down on a bulky lever. The top half of the cylinder began to spin. The cover popped open. She peered inside it.

Setsura heard a strange voice. The girl thrust her hand into the cylinder and withdrew it. She was holding a toad. A big one. Its legs splayed out from the palm of her hand, it struggled desperately to pull them back in, while flashing Setsura a contemptuous look.

"Hi there," Setsura smiled with tired eyes.

"*Guu*—" croaked the toad.

"Perhaps you already know, but this knowledge can only be found today in legends passed down by the Ottoman sultans. The toad is said to be the most effective creature for revealing a vampire's true nature. Do you think that an outrageous idea?"

Setsura didn't have an opinion.

Vampire legends typically concerned their supernatural powers and terrifying aspects, as well as their weaknesses and ways of detecting them. For example, that when a casket was opened the skin of a vampire would be as vivacious as when it was truly alive. That caskets were buried filled with blood. That vampires feared running water. That they abhorred crucifixes.

These latter two were widely considered revealing vulnerabilities.

In Hungary, a vampire couldn't walk down a road lined with briars. In Bulgaria, the milk of a cow milked by a vampire turned red. It was something of a historical irony that among the countless legends arising in the countries of Eastern Europe conquered by the Ottomans, the one describing the toad as the most effective means of detection should find a place in the sultan's palaces.

Newly spawned toads were fed insects raised on sugar and

copious amounts of pure water. After thirty days, the amphibious tissues grew particularly sensitive to the presence of vampires. Right now, the toad inside the cylinder's terrarium-like environment was quite different from the ordinary representative of the species.

"Look."

The girl deposited the lumpy toad beneath a glass cone. Inside the cone were three colors of dots. Three different kinds of red, blue and white mosquitoes. The bugs sensed that something was wrong and flitted around inside the cone. The gray lump stared at them coldly, and then suddenly opened its mouth.

The pink tongue shot out and plucked an insect out of the air and drew back inside its mouth. All in a split second. The toad's eyelids closed. And sat there still as a rock.

"We have the results." Her voice was a tad livelier than usual.

"What?"

"It ate the red mosquito. Each of them is engineered to give off the smell of blood, increasing in strength from red to blue and white. The toad chose the mosquito that carried your blood—the one with the weakest odor. That means the transformation is proceeding at a slow rate."

"Meaning you don't have to worry about me pouncing on you."

"That is a meaningless observation as far as I am concerned."

"Sorry."

"No reason to be." She closed her eyes and soon opened them

again. The gesture suggested processing the statement and then purging the thought.

"How should we proceed?"

"You have nothing to worry about. As long as you are not compelled to drink blood, the status quo should continue for thirty years or so."

"Will I acquire the knowledge of the vampires?"

"Unfortunately, no. I should count myself lucky and abandon the idea."

"Understood." Setsura nodded his appreciation, and got to his feet. "Give my thanks to Miss Nuvenberg and the toad."

"Um—" the girl said. "Could I have a kiss as thanks?"

"As thanks?"

"Yes."

"Sorry. It slipped my mind." Setsura leaned over and kissed the girl on her right cheek. The "skin" was hard and cool. Climbing the stairs, Setsura looked for the raven but couldn't see it anywhere.

"Too bad. Tell her next time I'll stick around for tea."

After Setsura left, a voice called down to the girl, who was still standing there as if frozen in place. "So, made your day, huh?" The black wings came to a halt on the ceiling lamp.

Without answering, the girl raised her right hand. With a creak, a skylight opened that hadn't been there before. "Go," she said.

“You’re quite the slave driver,” the raven grumbled as it flew out the window.

The flapping of wings faded into the distance. The girl closed the skylight. She touched her right cheek. Her face softened into a smile, and then soon hardened again. She tried several more times, but gave up.

“I wasn’t made to smile,” she said to herself, as if recognizing the fact for the first time.

She raised her left hand to her cheek and slowly massaged the surface, as if to return some human warmth and tenderness to the artificial flesh.

Part Five: Monkey Cage Ambush

Chapter One

Setsura stopped at the first phone booth he spotted after leaving Magic Town. He made two calls in ten minutes. The third number he dialed was the direct line to the mayor's office.

"Kajiwara speaking." The mayor answered the phone promptly and warmly.

"This is Aki."

"Hey, what's up?" the mayor boomed genuinely. He must be doing well, avoiding any inconvenient cabinet coups and the odd assassination attempt.

"Oh, same-old, same-old," Setsura lied. "I wanted to ask you the same thing. But first, I need to get in touch with Chief Kumagaki. Make it your top priority. If that's not possible, then you need to strip him of his authority and take steps to revoke any orders he's issued."

"What, did they get to him?" The warmth disappeared from his voice.

"That's what it looks like," Setsura calmly replied. "Mayor, when you were first attacked, your secretary was physically abducted. Why weren't we informed about this earlier?"

The mayor fumbled for a reply. "Well—ah—it must have slipped my mind at the time. I ordered the Chief to launch a search right away. I thought that should suffice."

“Complacency is our greatest enemy. And by now we may only be shutting the barn doors. I contacted the police and the Chief’s residence. No one knows where he’s been the last two days. Or rather—and this is only a hypothesis—he set off for work the next day and also came home. But at night.”

The mayor mulled this over.

“At night, anybody who saw him wouldn’t have thought there was anything amiss. Last night as well, he would have awoken after sunset, said he was going to the office, and left.”

“Then where is he now?”

“He hasn’t returned home. He must have a retreat somewhere out of the bright light of day.”

“I find all this hard to believe. Do you have any other evidence?”

“Isn’t what I just told you enough?”

“No—it’s sufficient.”

“However, there’s something else I need to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“Contact all the important players in the ward and find out who among them is sleeping during the day, and where.”

“So you suspect others?” the mayor asked coldly.

“I don’t know. We must avoid harboring unnecessary expectations and unjustified suspicions. If worst comes to worst, they must be treated the same as the Chief. Any encountered while

asleep should be wrapped in something opaque and taken to Mephisto Hospital without exposing their bodies to the sun. There are doctors there who know how to handle them."

"Doctor Mephisto—surely no one else would know better." The mayor let out a long sigh. "How do I get hold of you?"

"I'll be in touch."

"Understood. What are you doing after this?"

"There are some things I need to take care of."

"I understand. Aki—Setsura-kun—" Warmth returned to the mayor's voice.

"Yes."

"I trust you. I know you'll have my back."

"I'd appreciate it if you could have a dossier on your secretary—name and photo and personal details—sent over to my place."

"Will do. It'll be there ASAP."

Setsura said goodbye and hung up. From the telephone box he turned onto Waseda Boulevard. It was a relatively safe street, packed with people and cars. And more than anything else, the hustle and bustle of life filled with light.

Setsura stopped in his tracks, as if stunned by the sheer volume of light. Several seconds later, a shadow of discomfort passed across his comely face, gleaming there in the middle of the day. But then he set off down the street as if nothing was amiss.

During the day, this city was at rest. From a window somewhere came the cry of a bird.

He came to the end of the sidewalk and raised a hand, intending to take a taxi to Mephisto Hospital.

“Hey, you there,” said a hard voice behind him.

Setsura smiled—half grimaced—as he turned around. The bad vibe striking him on the back contained a strong element of fear.

Two uniformed police officers. They looked at him as they might a wanted outlaw. Their right hands rested on the grips of their guns. There wasn’t a police box in sight. They must have chanced upon him during a beat patrol.

“What the problem, officers?” Setsura asked quietly. Things were coming to a boil.

“Are you Setsura Aki?” asked the fifty-something cop.

“Yeah.”

“You’re under arrest. Come with us please.”

“Fine with me. But what’s the charge?”

“You’re on the wanted list. Don’t know the reason.”

“And if I refuse?”

The faces of the two grew hard. Setsura didn’t think he had that kind of a reputation. The all-points bulletin must have made him out to be a real bad guy. They pulled out their Magnum revolvers and flipped off the safeties. Their trigger fingers twitched. The trigger

fingers of Shinjuku cops itched a lot more than those in the outside world.

These Magnums had a double-action trigger pull of seven pounds, with four pounds in single action. Like the cops who carried them, it didn't take much to send the bullets flying.

Running away would be simple enough. And in another five minutes or so, they'd get the mayor's orders to countermand the Chief of Police. More than that, though, Setsura was curious.

He held up his hands. "Don't worry. I'll come along quietly."

The cops relaxed considerably. The younger of the two thumbed his mike and called for a patrol car. They didn't search him. Police procedures went differently in this city. Weapons could be hidden inside of bones and hair could turn into knives. Patting down a suspect was the height of stupidity. Claws and fangs might be bared, and clothes and skin could spout poison.

The citizens of Shinjuku streamed past, emotionless, without rubbernecking. On top of it being an everyday occurrence, there was the added wisdom of minding one's own business. Sightseers who stopped and gawked were caught up in the flow. And what they were staring at, of course, were Setsura's good looks.

The patrol car arrived in five minutes. It wasn't an ordinary street vehicle, but a mobile police armored personnel carrier. Flanked by two cops, Setsura sat down in the back.

As the vehicle raced down Waseda Boulevard, Setsura asked, "So what was in that APB?"

“No talking,” the young cop said in a brusque voice.

“Ah, give it a break,” interjected the commando cop next to him. “You won’t make any friends in this town being such a hardass. If you don’t lighten up, a greenie like you won’t make it through the first weekend. Don’t you think, Aki-san?”

The older man furrowed his brows. “You know each other?”

“I heard about him from my old squad leader. Found him this morning in Kabuki-cho, his head clean cut off. Even though he was decapitated at night, the medical examiner put the time of death at three hours later. It may have been some new species of monster, but he was still a colleague. I’m Endou. Kusama-san was the one who showed me the ropes. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here.”

“As for the charges. Pretty serious stuff. Comes down to bumping off five brokers in Arakimachi and bombing a daycare center in Kamiochiai.”

“That is pretty serious stuff,” Setsura conceded, staring up at the ceiling of the car.

Six months before, a certain “Mr. T,” a currency broker, was gunned down in Arakimachi along with four of his associates. It seemed cult-related. Their bodies were riddled with 9 mm parabellum rounds and then devoured—except for the heads. The corpses—or rather, the leftovers—were scattered across the interior of the business like a carpet of red roses.

The wise guys in Shinjuku’s Nichome—”crime central”—offered

up a healthy reward for the thugs who'd bombed the daycare center. If word got out that Setsura had voluntarily turned himself in, even as a suspect, the hundreds of bounty hunters on the case would be mad enough to spit fire.

"It hadn't occurred to me that I might be a homicidal maniac," Setsura observed blandly.

Endou laughed in a hoarse voice. "Yeah, you keep your nose clean. Threw me for a loop too. And yet you climbed in here without a fuss. But I figured that's because you and the squad leader go way back."

"Thanks."

Endou addressed his fellow officers. "I hate to keep harping on this, but you've got the wrong guy."

"The idea didn't just pop into our heads," the younger of the uniformed cops said. "The Chief authorized the APB himself. Just following orders."

"It's not like it's our job to go around picking up innocent people." Endou patted him on the shoulder with his club-like fist, hard enough to wrinkle the cop's body armor.

"Yeah, that's enough," said the driver, who'd been quiet until now. "We're almost there. But I've never heard the Chief give a direct order like that, not in the last ten years. Still, strange things have been going on lately."

"What kind of strange things?" Setsura leaned forward.

The driver glanced up at the rearview mirror and coughed. He did his best to mask his state of mind when looking at Setsura's face. "Oh, this and that."

"What kind of this and that?" Setsura asked again, looking at the driver in the rearview mirror.

"Hey!"

Endou reached over and grabbed the steering wheel. The vehicle was riding up on the shoulder of the road. The driver tore his eyes away from the rearview mirror.

"Sorry."

"No problem. I'm not surprised, what with this lady-killer in the back."

"Yeah."

These two were rugged and battle-tested. The two in the back, holding onto their seats for dear life, looked like they were about to lose their lunches. That kind of lily-livered reaction disqualified them as candidates for the mobile police. They had to have the nerves to blow away a water demon passing as an exact replica of a human, based only on gut instincts only. The kind of *savoir faire* to take a smoking break in a room full of dynamite and casually flick away the burning match.

Before Setsura could resume his questioning, the shadow of a rectangular building eclipsed them on the right. The closest police station, Totsuka Station.

Chapter Two

Setsura walked willingly into the holding cell on the first floor. Along with the X-ray machines and metal detectors, prisoners were administered special drugs to exorcise any demonic beings lurking inside them.

The monkey cages were at the very back of the station, located behind three heavy steel doors. The isolation cells were reserved for the most violent criminals. The bars were made from high-tensile alloy steel, each over an inch in diameter. The foundations consisted of hardened concrete as resilient as a Cold War era atomic bomb shelter.

Setsura had gone along with the charade this far in order to smoke out his enemy and force them to make the first move. What the raven told him at Nuvenberg's house and the behavior of the police right now fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The mayor's secretary had turned the Chief of Police, but for some reason he hadn't ordered Setsura killed on sight. Perhaps because that was an order few cops would obey. In any case, now that he'd been confined here, he intended to wait out the assassins sure to come when night fell.

There were plenty of other things to think through in the meantime. Takako's condition. Her mother's. What Yakou and his gang were up to. What Mephisto was up to. Mephisto had always been an unknowable quality. When he got like this, it was hard not

to think he was a lot closer to *them* than he was to *us*.

Setsura hadn't told him about being bit, but he couldn't count on Ryuuki or Shuuran not to spill the beans. When that happened, there was no telling how Mephisto would react. He sensed it wouldn't be pleasant. So he kept mum. But his current situation meant he had to leave everything else to Mephisto's discretion.

The only step he'd taken was to ask Endou what time he got off work, and ask him to stop by with a care package. Endou was agreeable to the proposition.

The next few hours passed without incident. Then Endou appeared, accompanied by a guard carrying a shotgun. "Long time, no see," he joked in a strangely formal tone of voice. He stood in front of the cell, pretty much blocking the view.

Including the isolation cells, shared cells and the holding pens, there were fifty monkey cages in the Totsuka Station lockup. Thirty were single-occupancy. There weren't many concerns about housing petty thieves and purse snatchers together. The reason for the disparity was the large number of criminals who would just as soon kill their bunkmates as say hello.

Setsura's first-class cell was one of ten, five on either side of a narrow corridor. Oddly enough, he was the only one there.

"Here you go," Endou said, holding out a paper bag.

Setsura looked inside and smiled wryly. Thick, baked *senbei*. Tea in a styrofoam cup, the kind sold at fast-food joints.

"The squad leader told me once that *senbei* was a specialty of

yours. The driver got the tea. He says it's good for you. He added to give him a call if you're in the mood for a jailbreak."

"I'll keep that in mind," Setsura said with a nod.

In another context, the gesture might have been taken for that of a spoiled scion who'd never broken a sweat in his life. Even the jail clerk was a bit taken aback.

"The sun sets soon," said Endou, glancing at his watch.

"That concern you?"

"Ah—" He hesitated. "The driver didn't get around to saying it, but I know where he's coming from. One way or another, nighttime around here is just plain scary. When you see that fat red ball of the setting sun, you can't help but feel a chill down the spine. Hey, laugh if you want, but what's going on right now is a first for me."

"Just you?"

The commando cop grimaced in response to Setsura's question. The rugged man shook his head. "Back at Division, I brought up the subject in a roundabout way. I'd say it pretty much applies to everybody."

He looked at Setsura. At some point, the handsome prisoner had taken a bite out of the *senbei*. *An innocent man*—the realization struck Endou like a blow to the back of the head. This young man belonged to a completely different species. He was a magician possessed by a fierce and supernatural spirit.

Endou broke out in a cold sweat.

“I’ve tasted better,” Setsura said in a carefree tone of voice.

It was enough to break the spell holding Endou. The crunching of *senbei* reached his ears. “Not to your liking?”

“They’re using low-grade rice, probably cast-off material diverted into the black market. The baking temperature wasn’t carefully controlled either.”

“Yeah, businessmen don’t take pride in their work anymore.”

“I wouldn’t blame the businessmen. Selling is their job. This is a manufacturing problem.”

There was something vast and indeterminable in the young man’s remarks that made the commando cop hang on his every word. The jail clerk was equally entranced.

Perhaps wishing to wash the bad taste out of his mouth, Setsura downed the tea in a single gulp. “Hey, can I ask you something,” he said to the jail clerk.

“What?” Enthralled, the clerk blinked. The sternness in his voice was entirely forced.

“Any unusual changes in the disposition of my case?”

“Nope.”

“Nothing from the Chief?”

“There was a call from Division a short time ago. A team from special investigations was coming to take custody. And that will be that. Par for the course.”

“How long ago?”

The clerk checked his watch. “Say, thirty minutes.”

Setsura turned to face the door. The two men looked back at him. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

“What?” asked Endou.

As if in answer to the question, a light above the secured entranceway to the cell block lit up. A buzzer sounded.

“Speak of the devil. We have visitors. I’ll give you your coat when we hand you over.”

“Stop.”

“What?”

Endou and the jail clerk eyed the *senbei* shop owner suspiciously. The clerk stepped forward to unlock the cell. He scowled, his body came to a halt, spun like a top, and was flung down to the end of the corridor.

The door to the cell block slid open to the right. Led by another officer, four shadows slipped inside the cell block like a pool of ink oozing around a jam. One of them, pushed by their escort, whipped out a billy club and slammed it against the back of his head. The cop collapsed quietly to the floor.

Endou pointed his right hand down the corridor. The laser gun attached to his arm hummed on its turret, aiming at the chest of the first assailant.

The shadowy hand of the assailant spit fire. Endou sprawled

forward. The action seemed at once natural and somehow awkward. But the bullets zipped over his head and thudded into the wall.

A red beam shot up from the floor intersecting both the man's chest and the wall behind him. As his back belched fire and blue smoke, the man lowered the muzzle toward Endou. Endou threw himself to the side. Sparks erupted from the concrete floor where he'd just been.

He braced himself against the ricochets pounding into his helmet and shoulder pads and steadied himself to return fire.

A strange scene unfolded before his eyes.

The narrow corridor forced the assailants into a single file. The arms and legs of the first two dropped off like sliced radishes. Blood gushed from their gaping mouths. Endou caught the flashes of light off their grossly elongated canines.

Undeterred by the ghastly fate of their companions, the two behind them advanced, pressing their hands against their torsos in order to stanch the gushing black blood. Their faces pale, their lips alone red—the faces of demons.

They sprang forward a good ten feet. As the first one swooped down on him, Endou grabbed him by the lapels, planted his heel against his chest and sent him tumbling backwards. The man tucked in his head and rolled, lashing out with his foot at the back of Endou's head.

The loud thud that followed was not a crushing contact with his head. As soon as Endou had crossed his arms in a defensive

measure, a blast sent the man flying.

The jail clerk who'd been thrown to the end of the corridor had returned with a shotgun.

The assailant flipped over Endou's head and pancaked onto the floor. Endou went into a protective crouch. He had no naïve expectations, even though each shell contained nine explosive pellets. The fuses lit upon impact. The explosive force was equal to a hand grenade.

The jail clerk shouted. The man was getting up, hands pressed against his chest, his body disintegrating on the spot.

"Don't even think it, buddy," Endou said, assuming a fighting stance.

Then he realized that the man wasn't looking at him. Setsura was standing next to him. The door of the isolation cell was open. The lock was severed as if by a hot knife through a stick of butter. The last assailant was splayed out on the ground next to it. His head sat several inches away from his stretched-out arms, like a football player who'd leapt forward to make a catch and missed. The mouth opened and closed silently, mimicking a stranded fish.

"So you expected nobody to be armed in here? Ah, some people never learn."

The second he heard Setsura's voice, the remaining man's determination wavered. As he bolted for the door, his back split open like an overripe tomato. Dark blood sprayed out. He pushed through the door and took off.

“What the hell is going on?” asked the jail clerk with wide eyes, cradling the shotgun. “Assassins?”

Endou checked over the man’s head and torso, and then pulled an ID from his suit coat pocket. “He’s a special investigations detective from Division.”

“What—what is it?”

“A vampire?” asked Endou, looking up at Setsura.

Setsura didn’t answer the question. He said, “Just say exactly what you saw,” and walked toward the open door.

“Hey, wait—” both men called out at the same time.

The comely figure stopped and looked back at them.

“You gotta get back in the cell,” said the jail clerk, leveling the shotgun.

“How’d you kill them?” the command cop asked. “You must have been packing some kind of heat.”

“Sorry, but I can’t stick around,” Setsura said to the jail clerk. To Endou, “When we parted ways in the lobby, I left my weapon in your pocket for safekeeping. When you came with the tea and *senbei*, I retrieved it.”

Endou reflexively reached into his pocket, but stopped himself. This was why Setsura had asked when he got off patrol. Knowing that it was before sunset must have been a relief. That was when the vampires came out.

“What if I’d gotten involved in a case and was delayed? I’m just a

cop in the mobile police, after all. Trouble is my business." A startled look of self-realization rose to Endou's face. It gradually dissolved into a more enigmatic look. "Yeah, I see—you—you didn't have any doubts—you're a helluva confident man. Because you knew loverboy would be chomping at the bit the whole time."

He was referring to his partner, the driver.

"What are you two talking about? Get back in the cell or I'll shoot!"

"Knock if off," Endou said in a tired voice.

"What are you saying?"

"Don't you get it? You're pointing a gun at the man who saved your hide."

But he ignored the commando cop, as if he'd just started talking gibberish, and tightened his finger on the trigger. Setsura was already headed out the door.

"Freeze!" Endou aimed his Magnum right between his eyes.

The jail clerk's body did a one-eighty. Endou watched, amazed, as the man ran full tilt into the wall. This time none too gently. He dropped like a rock, the breath clean knocked out of him.

After watching Setsura disappear through the door, Endou said with a rush of emotion, "Dumb bastard doesn't know how lucky he is."

He wasn't referring to Setsura.

Chapter Three

Darkness covered the city.

The darkness in Demon City Shinjuku wasn't the same as in the outside world. The residents of Shinjuku knew that as well as they knew their own names, and they'd noticed in the past few days that it'd taken on additional meaning and depth.

It was tinged with crimson.

The two figures walking along Shinjuku Avenue in the Yotsuya third block neighborhood suddenly stopped. In the pale blue light, they could easily be discerned as a fierce and gallant man, and a woman of spellbinding beauty.

They were both wearing Chinese dress. The man was missing his right arm below the elbow. In this city, even that was not enough to draw undue attention. The ancient koto he was carrying, though, was rare enough to be an exception to the rule.

"What are we going to do?" the girl asked in an anxious voice.

The man watched the people flowing past him with a disinterested expression. He said in a stone-like voice, "*I* shall be going on alone."

"What are you saying?" The girl's face colored with a degree of anguish resembling death. "You are so awfully tired, Sir Ryuuki."

"I've been tired for two thousand years now." The warrior smiled

wanly. “You should return, Shuuran. I will disappear.”

“W-Where to?”

“I don’t know. But in this city, there must be places that would grant me asylum. I suppose I could live out my life slumming among the vagrants.”

“Live out your life—you are talking like a person whose life can end.” Resignation tainted the words of her ravishing beauty. “Sir Kikiou doesn’t understand. Even in this city, there is no place we may call home.”

As if in proof of her words, the currents of humanity flowed silently around them. Those who had a home to return to and those who did not right now had only the road before them. A man never stopped walking until he rested in the grave.

Though as Shuuran said, the two of them did not belong here. Their faces, let alone their bodies, bore no scars or evidence of how they had broken through the impregnable walls of Mephisto Hospital.

“I understand.”

Joy shone in Shuuran’s eyes. “Then stay here and fight Setsura Aki to the bitter end, as Princess ordered. If you do, then I will do likewise. Ask me anything and I shall be at your service.”

“That is not possible now.” Ryuuki stared off into the distance, as if listening to the darkness itself. “Princess will not forgive another blunder. I do not fear being punished. Nor am I frightened by whatever Setsura Aki has to offer. At some point we must fight until

the last man standing. All I want is the time before that occurs. Except that I do not know when that will be."

"Then fight with me by your side." She wrapped her white fingers around his right sleeve. The strength flowing from her fingers soothed the infinite extremes of Ryuuki's melancholy countenance.

“No.” He shook his head. “Losing you would leave Princess at loose ends. I can be replaced. You cannot.”

“There is no one for me but you. Besides—” She couldn’t finish the thought.

“It is all right. As far as Princess is concerned, I am only one man. But Princess has undoubtedly changed since returning from Mephisto Hospital.”

“That’s why—!”

More than the surprise at not having realized this until Ryuuki pointed it out, Shuuran’s reaction was more a response to the development of a situation she thought impossible. She hadn’t understood the cause.

“Are you saying things have come to the point that she could lose you and not bat an eye? What happened in Mephisto Hospital?” Her voice quieted to a low moan. “I can’t believe it. That—that doctor—Sir Ryuuki, have you abandoned so much hope? To even abandon Princess?”

“I do not know myself.”

As if pushed apart by the moonlight shining down on them, the two shadows separated. One did not move. The other silently retreated the way it had come.

An infinite distance stretched out between them. The remaining silhouette said to herself heavily, “Setsura Aki. If you died, Sir Ryuuki would return. No. Even if he never returned, I cannot pardon

what was done to Princess. You will learn to fear the night. Make even the slightest mistake, and I will be there to take advantage."

Instead of hightailing it out of Totsuka Station right after emerging from the death match in the holding cells, Setsura made his way to the captain's office. The cops chasing him froze in fear—until the order came from the Chief himself to investigate all outgoing communications and Internet connections.

Shortly after sunset, Yakou visited Mephisto Hospital in the company of several of his subordinates. He'd originally planned on making this visit two days earlier. The Elder's funeral accounted for the delay.

His purpose was to determine where the enemy was hiding.

In light of the showdown at the hospital the night his grandfather was attacked, they'd transported Takako to a different location. It wasn't that he doubted their defensive capabilities, but he feared other patients coming to harm.

Of course, no matter where she was, the vampires would come after her. The victim would try to run back to her accursed master. Yakou knew how to guard against that eventuality as well.

The problem was the new location of Princess's safe house.

But even in this case, the young leader of the Toyama clans did not lack for confidence. Which was why, when the secretary told him that the hospital director was "unavailable," he could hardly believe his ears.

"I let him know you were here. As far as Miss Kanan is

concerned, he said to leave it up to you, but that he cannot meet with you at this time."

"Was he suddenly called away on business?"

"I do not know."

"Please tell him that this concerns master expropriation."

"But—"

"Did he say you were not to contact him?"

"No."

The secretary spoke into her tiny lapel mike. The answer came at once. "I didn't think an opportunity to perform another master expropriation would present itself so soon." Doctor Mephisto's voice sounded on the intercom. "That police officer is useless. And there are no other vampires available."

"No, there is one. The man we found in the ruins next to Shinanomachi Station."

"Except his throat had been torn out. He was breathing his last."

"Has he died?"

"He seems to be doing well enough. But there is no mark of the vampire."

"I suspect it would be found on the flesh missing from his neck."

"If he is a vampire, then the wound would have healed already."

"There is only one exception. The master *intended* to kill the

victim."

"Do as you see fit," Mephisto said, in exactly the same tone of voice as before. "And how do you plan to proceed? If there is anything you need, let the hospital personnel know."

"I'll take you up on that. I would ask that nobody else be allowed to enter his room."

"Understood. He is in D-wing. Nurse Sayaki, please show them the way."

At some point, a small figure of the nurse had appeared next to them. She bowed politely.

Several minutes later, Yakou entered a room in the intensive care unit alone.

Setsura Aki. Doctor Mephisto. Four demonic beings. And Yakou. The ends each of them had in mind, and the wills they possessed to achieve them, would turn things in a new and frightening direction.

The night had only just begun.

Part Six: Battlefield Yakou

Chapter One

Setsura surveyed the scene before him. He muttered to himself, "*This* is the classy place these guys choose to hang out? What does that make *my* place?"

His voice vanished into the big hole in front of him, a symmetrical half-circle bored into a white wall. He looked down. In the direction of an uneven footpath about a yard wide was a drainage canal brimming with black water. Splotches of white light reflected off the wavering surface, fracturing the moonlight shimmering there.

According to Shinjuku's civil engineering schematics, any such canals should have dried up long ago. It was hard to believe that the wastewater collected here from the peaceful abodes of Shinjuku had ever been discharged from the treatment plants to again quench human thirst.

The steps leading up to ground level from the walkway behind him had partly crumbled away. The walls to the left and right were rippled and folded like the bellows of an enormous accordion squeezed in the hands of some rude giant.

Looking up from where Setsura was standing, only one of the huge chemical tanks remained. The rest had fallen into the abyss. The skin of the last cylinder was scarred with rust.

This was the one place in Shinjuku where water had once flowed freely—the remains of the underground water treatment plant

beneath the old Ochiai district.

It had undergone extensive renovations just before the Devil Quake struck. This prestigious public works project, utilizing the latest in cutting edge technology, had been thoroughly cannibalized by the restoration crews and now was good for little more than scrap metal.

But the water still flowed.

A splash—something that looked like a fish leapt upwards, droplets dripping off its silver scales—and plunged back into the water several yards away. Water returned to its source. Even with its human operators long gone and their dreams so many tears in the rain, life had returned to this subterranean treatment plant.

Setsura walked toward the entrance of the tunnel. The final quality control facility stretched on for several hundred yards. Chasing the vampire assassin who'd fled Totsuka Station, he'd arrived here.

The moonlit shadows cast deep, dark silhouettes on the walls, creating a terrible kind of beauty, a ravaged and worn still life. At the same time, this young man radiated back whatever beauty lay hidden in all this sickly degeneration. Those men who could transform the cruel and hideous into beauty were few and far between in Demon City Shinjuku.

What looked like a fat rope broke the surface of the water, right next to him. Setsura paid it no mind. The black torso reared up, shedding droplets of water. Its rigid stance made it look like a fence post. But the voice falling upon Setsura's head brought to mind

anything but an inanimate object.

"Hey, fashion model guy, where are you going?"

The white head floated there in the air. A small, innocent face of a child. But attached to its glistening, snake-like body, the result was frightening and grotesque. Most likely, during the Devil Quake, the soul of a young boy washed into the sewers had been abducted by evil spirits nesting in the earth, and had spawned this creature.

Setsura continued on his way. After a dozen feet or so, he again heard the voice beside him. "Hey, Mister, answer me!"

Setsura kept going. He'd taken five more steps when a black lump landed at his feet. With a heavy, sticky sound, it slapped against the concrete and rebounded. A twitching, fish-like animal, a third eaten through, the white bones sticking out. It had limbs like a person and translucent webbed fingers on its hands.

"That's what I eat. There's tons of them in the water—but they taste awful—a human body floated down here once—that was *so* good—I can still remember it—but they hardly ever come down here—but I can't reach up there yet so I'm really happy you showed up here Mister—"

The kid's head bobbed back and forth in front of Setsura's face, talking in a nonstop stream, not pausing between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next. Then the face vanished, and there was only the black torso.

The face popped up on his right. The kid smiled. For being confined to the water, the skin was remarkable, white and glowing.

The smile on its lips was almost too cute to stand. It flashed its teeth. They were all black.

The snake body wrapped around Setsura and slowly began to squeeze. The mouth opened wide and rushed towards his head. Even baring its fangs, it was an adorable face.

The face severed from its body and traced a slippery arc through the air. Right up until the moment it was sucked back into the water, the smile never left its face. Setsura ducked and wove around the writhing torso of the snake and plunged into the tunnel.

He thought he could hear a bird singing somewhere overhead. The darkness deepened. Even with the moonlight lost, Setsura could see as clearly as at midday. He stopped. A black puddle stained the concrete. Fresh blood. The blood of that police detective.

Though Setsura's devil wire had sliced into his back, thanks to the demonic power of the vampire he had staunched the flow sufficiently to make it this far. He must have paused here to collect his wits before proceeding to whatever passed for his crypt.

Setsura had wounded the man in order to drive him directly to his hideout, wrapping only a single strand of his wire around him.

Before beginning his pursuit, Setsura called the mayor from Totsuka Station and asked him to commence a search for those who had interfered with his directives. The assumption was not easily proven, but it'd become clear that vampire blood was spreading among the upper ranks of the ward's movers and shakers.

The mayor was already planning an aggressive, Shinjuku-wide

sweep. Before that happened, Setsura wanted to get all his ducks in a row. But circumstances were getting too out of control to allow that luxury.

"The underground water treatment facility?" Setsura mused to himself. "A vampire hunter could get way in over his head in a place like this." Too many of the pros bought too heavily into the folklore —like vampires not being able to cross running water. Setsura wouldn't make the mistake of believing *that* canard.

After continuing on for some ways, the canal suddenly widened considerably. At the same time, a strange sound reached his ears. The echo of hard, metallic objects brushing against each other. Another two hundred yards or so and the source of the sound became clear.

The sewer water originally collected there to be treated. The canal broadened to form a small lake. Breaking the black surface here and there were half-submerged box-like containers. The kind of steel lockers and cabinets that every office had in abundance.

Despite the treatment facilities being long defunct, creatures like the mutated water snake still disturbed the water. Caught up in the ripples, the numerous steel boxes ground together, raising that small, scratching sound.

The scattered splotches of blood changed direction, reached the end of the walkway, and stopped.

Setsura was in their lair. His right hand twitched almost imperceptibly as he moved without hesitation toward the bobbing shapes—darker than the surrounding darkness—and toward the owner of those bloodstains.

He stepped into the water. The sole of the shoe surely would have hit the water's surface, but no ripples spread out from the point of contact. With steps no different than if he was on land, Setsura nimbly crossed the water to the clump of lockers.

To the vampire's habitat, the casket.

He was supported by two strands of devil wire skimming the surface. The end of one wire was wrapped around the handle of one of the lockers. And yet Setsura was confident he'd contributed no movements other than that of the casket bobbing naturally in the water.

Drawing closer to the locker, he gently waved his hand. The handle turned. The door of the locker opened with the whispering silence of the wires themselves.

It was empty. As was the one next to it, and the one after that.

"Still out on the town, huh."

He'd seen this coming. The behavior of the vampire was ruled by the night. This night as well, all of the residents of these lockers were willfully—or under orders of one sort or another—indulging their bloodlusts.

Setsura listened closely. He didn't have to listen hard. He heard groaning directly opposite from where he was standing. By uncovering their hiding places, he'd accomplished his primary goal. The problem was exactly who was in this nest of vampires.

He could wait here until they returned. But when he thought about what they were likely to be up to, he couldn't turn his back on

their nighttime activities.

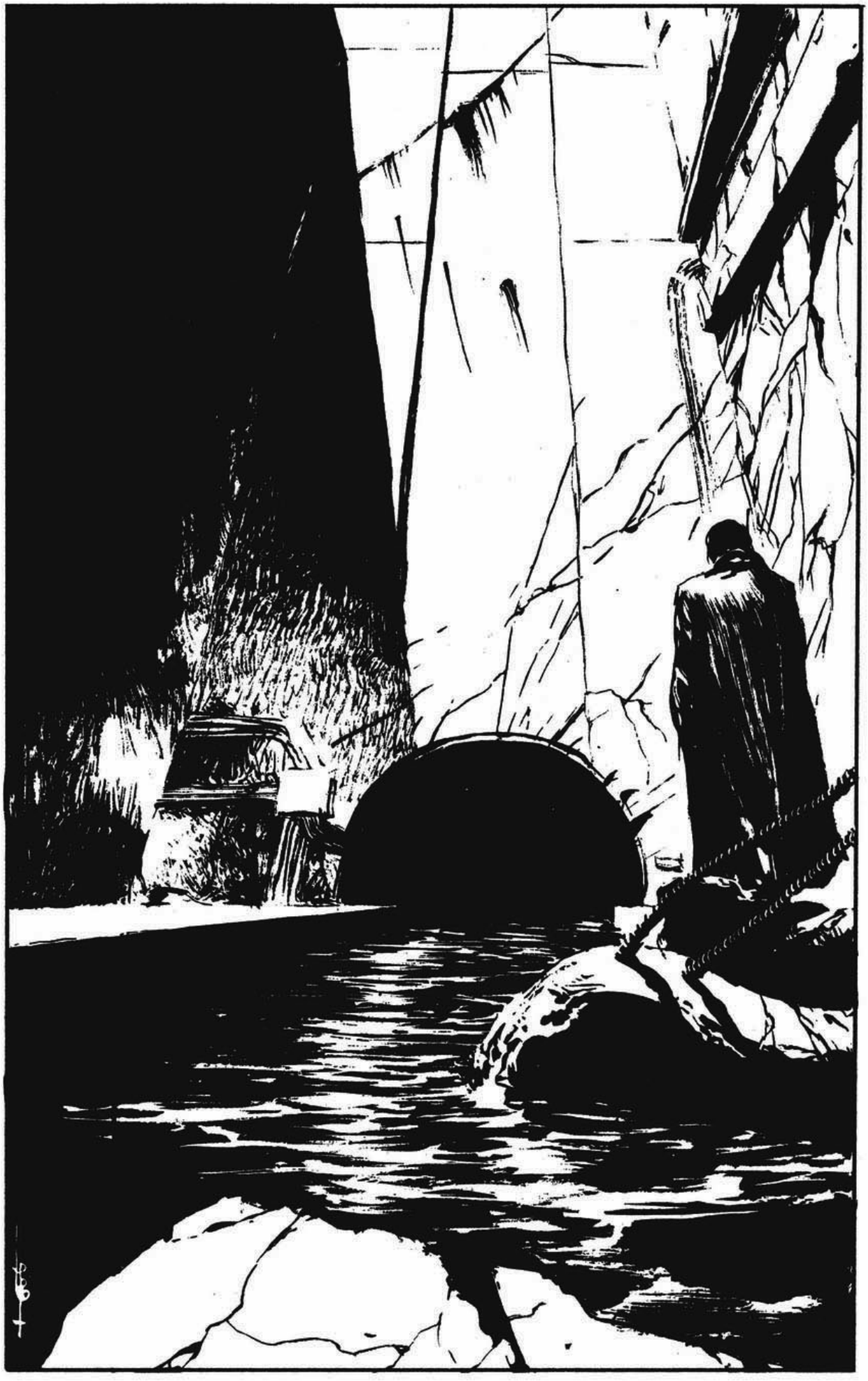
Setsura lashed a strand of wire around a piece of construction material jutting from the ceiling. He rose into the air. Swinging like a pendulum over the bobbing lockers, he stopped about a yard over the one emitting the groans. He didn't look like he was hanging there. His arm was perfectly relaxed.

"There's something I'd like to ask you," he said softly, floating in the air.

The moans ceased. The door of the locker flung open. The police detective from before sat up. His evil eyes scanned the air above him, finally focusing on Setsura.

Blank surprise filled his face. "Who the fuck are you?" It took him a bit of effort to get the words out.

"Oh, didn't the Chief tell you?" Setsura replied nonchalantly. His attitude wasn't so much on purpose this time as it was the product of Shuuran's doll sucking his blood and getting blasted by Ryuuki's *qi*. "I own a *senbei* shop in West Shinjuku. Would the Chief happen to be around?"



“What do you think?” the cop retorted, with a blood-red look in his eyes that communicated a private understanding. He planted his hands on either side of the locker. “He told me to kill you. But just looking at you, I can tell that would be a waste. Become one of us. Taste the pleasures this world can’t offer.”

“What a sweet-talker you are.” Suspended in the air, Setsura smiled. A trance came across the cop’s face. Their night visions were equally effective. “But first I’d like an answer to my question. Where’s the Chief? And what other big shots are involved?”

“You think I’m a fucking idiot?” the cop roared. He reached out, a Remington M870 pump-action shotgun in his right hand, his left on the pump. Locked and loaded. An immortal vampire didn’t have much to fear from a gun going off accidentally.

The barrel swung around. The split second before the gun roared and the fire split the darkness, Setsura vaulted over the man’s head and landed on a locker a half-dozen feet away. The cop spun around and leveled the barrel—and realized that his hands weren’t there anymore.

He looked down. The gun lay across his lap, his hands still attached to it. Blood erupted from his severed limbs.

“*Bastard—!*” The shout was cut off by a sharp stabbing pain cutting into the back of his neck.

“Even a vampire will die if he loses his head,” Setsura explained in his drowsy tones. The disinterested expression on his face only compounded the threat. “In any case, your little Dracula lair will be

dust before sunrise. You might want to give some thought to what fate awaits you after that. Where's the Chief?"

"H-He's—not—here—"

"Then where?"

"K-Keio—Plaza—Hotel—"

"Well, the man certainly has taste," Setsura said enviously. "I think I'll crash at his place instead. Sorry, but I'll be going by myself. Who else is there?"

"The—d-deputy—mayor."

Setsura shook his head knowingly. "No wonder the mayor's directives didn't get through. Kikiou's plan for subjugating Shinjuku seems to be proceeding right on schedule. Where else might your colleagues be?"

"I—don't—know—"

"I understand. Sleep well."

Setsura's countenance briefly darkened with grief. The next moment, the detective's head flipped into the air. The body collapsed into the locker. The head thumped onto its chest.

Setsura's devil wire slit open the sheet metal. The locker slid beneath the surface of the black, bubbling water.

"Disposing of the casket might not be enough," Setsura Aki observed, sounding tired and bitter. "A place sunlight never reaches —this calls for some thinking outside the box."

Chapter Two

Whether day or night, whether the wind was blowing or not, a sound like rustling leaves drifted beyond the tall white fence. Hearing that sound, pedestrians on the street outside the fence couldn't help imagining some *thing* leaping over the barrier and dragging them in there.

Nobody who entered ever left. That was a fact of life. Anybody who claimed otherwise was lying.

Nobody knew what it was actually like inside the fence. There were maps available from the early days. Nobody could vouch for their reliability. The originals were all stored in a vault in a sub-basement of the Ministry of Defense. It was said that not even the Prime Minister could lay his hands on them without following a prescribed set of procedures.

The original maps had been surveyed by a team from the Self-Defense Forces, armed and equipped with the latest and greatest. Needless to say, none of them had made it out alive.

So nobody really knew what the place was like these days. The only sources of information were rumors and guesswork. They built a wall to keep whatever was *in* from getting *out*. And prayed for the best.

No lovers strolled hand-in-hand down the paths on spring evenings. No students pored over their notes at the library in the

early afternoons. All gone away. This was Chuo Park in West Shinjuku. The infamous "DMZ." The most dangerous place in the city.

Nine o'clock at night. A jet-black limousine cruised down the vacant streets. It came to a halt at the entrance to the park, directly behind the Park Hyatt Tokyo.

Three figures emerged, all wearing dark suits. Two middle-aged men and one younger. Even beyond the glow of the street lights, their skin still had a blue-white cast to it. The casual way their sharp eyes scanned the stark surroundings said everything.

The younger man spoke to the driver. The car sped off.

"What was that about, Yakou-sama?" asked Yuen, referring to the limousine. He appeared to be at least ten years older than Yakou.

"If we make it back here," answered Yakou, "then walking home will be an afterthought. Otherwise, having him wait around won't accomplish anything."

"That's for certain," agreed Yuen.

"It's about twenty feet," estimated Zhang, the other of the two men accompanying him. "No gate. There's no way in but over."

"Hold on tight," said Yakou.

He held his hands against their sides, elbows out. The two men took a firm hold. Yakou sank down slightly and leaned forward as if he were about to perform a standing high jump over the twenty foot wall with no running approach.

His suit coat unfolded to the right and left. It didn't tear. Rather, it seemed designed to open along the spine.

In a whirl of wind, the three of them soared into the air. Then, in an unhurried fashion, they fell back to earth behind the wall. Though it might be better to say they alit upon the ground.

Vampires weren't immune to the laws of gravity. Supporting their weight—until they settled back on solid ground—and buffeting the earth with strong downdrafts of wind was an ominous pair of wings that had sprouted from Yakou's back. Only one species of vampire had these large, black bat wings.

The hot air billowed up from their feet. The two men shivered, chilled down to their bones. Such was the unkind welcome that this strange hot air inflicted upon these residents of the Toyama housing project.

The peculiar panorama filled their view. Gently curved, stone-lined sidewalks, well-maintained trees and lawns, water fountains – dry but unmarred and appearing to be in perfect working order. Except for the absence of people, a perfectly ordinary park bathed in gentle moonlight.

It'd be hard to imagine anything odder than this.

"We seem to have come to the wrong place," Yuen quipped with a straight face.

Zhang said nothing. They were Toyama's elite, both hand-picked by Yakou himself. Even welcome at Mephisto Hospital.

"Shall we go?"

Yakou set off. Behind him, Zhang asked, “Does anybody know where we’re going?”

He wasn’t expressing any second thoughts. He was considering a worst case scenario where nobody ended up knowing the enemy’s location. Under Yakou’s master expropriation, the intoxicated vagrant had indicated Chuo Park as the place where those four demons had located their safe house.

“I left a note at Mephisto Hospital.” The two subordinates exchanged glances and nodded. “However,” Yakou added with a backwards glance, “I am not convinced telling Doctor Mephisto was the right thing to do.” There was a hard edge to his voice.

“And by that you mean—”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It is only a feeling. Thinking about it does no good. That doctor is a very dangerous person under normal circumstances. I suspect we do not see eye to eye on many things.”

“Coming from you, Yakou-sama—” Yuen mumbled.

“I have high hopes for Aki-san,” said Yakou, changing the subject.

The men proceeded wordlessly beneath the moonlight like silhouettes on a movie screen. They could feel the very real surface of the road through the soles of their shoes. The warm July breezes played with their hair.

While knowing it was all a facade, the scene opening up before

their eyes was the reality, and Demon City and the lives they lived there were the illusion.

Stone steps came up on their right. They climbed the stairs and entered a grove of trees.

"What do you think?" Yakou asked, in a manner suggestive of a man out for a relaxing stroll.

Yuen said, "This seems to be derived from the memories of an actual experience. It's blocked the inputs from our physical senses."

Zhang agreed. "And reality won't return until it is destroyed. It's also connected to our subjective experience. Yakou-sama, that oak tree there on the left, how would it react to a *shuriken*?"

Three hands reached out. Three dagger-like *shuriken* cut through the air and with a burning sound buried themselves into the trunk of the tree. Moonlight glinted off the steel shafts.

Yuen gaped. Each dagger had a completely different effect. Yuen's sank in half way. Zhang's buried itself completely. Yakou's passed through it like it wasn't even there and shot through several trees behind it.

Zhang grinned slyly at his partner. "Yeah, it's not easy shedding the conviction that reality is only what you see with your eyes."

Yuen shrugged.

The magical forces alive in this park disturbed the cognitive powers of even these three supernatural men. A normal person wouldn't doubt the "reality" for a second, and the park would

respond in kind.

“As long as we are with Yakou-sama, at least the blind won’t be leading the blind. We are not likely to see what he sees. But where might the enemy’s hiding place be located?”

“I don’t know,” Yakou said shortly. “This grove of trees? Or probably another one entirely. Doctor Mephisto says that their lair is filled with light, with a view of green forests and mountain ranges. What he means by all that is a mystery to me as well.”

“They came here on a ship, did they not?” Zhang asked.

“Yes. Aki-san witnessed it personally.”

“A street in Demon City turning into a river must have been an illusion. As would be their kingdom.”

“A safe assumption, but I find it hard to believe that the Doctor would be captivated by exactly the same hallucination as ourselves. Somewhere in this city should be found a brimming lake and a magnificent estate in an eternal world.”

For a short while, the men soaked up the moonlight. Then they started forward again. A feeling gripped their chests. They were vampires, as were their enemies. Both sides sought a place of safe refuge. And each side must eliminate the other.

After twenty minutes they came to a place overlooking an expansive lawn. They weren’t the only midnight strollers. Sitting on the grass and under the trees and on the benches were pairs of men and women listening to the whisperings of the summer wind.

Yakou stopped and asked, “Can you see that too?”

“Yes.”

“Definitely.”

“Let’s give the *shuriken* another try. Pick your own targets.” The odd proposition came from Yakou. Perhaps taking note of them, some of the people turned their quiet eyes on them. Yakou gazed back.

One in a circle of young people on the lawn stood up, strumming a guitar. The unmistakable sound of the guitar drifted toward them like smoke from a campfire. The guitar player separated from the group and approached them. He must have been the leader, for the rest of the group got up and tagged after him.

Yakou said, “That’s no guitar player.”

“I know,” the other two agreed.

The group was now close enough that they could make out the smiles on their faces. Again came the sound of the guitar. Responding to that signal, the young people opened their arms as if to welcome the three of them.

Two daggers sliced through the night air. The string snapped. A small hole appeared in the neck of the guitar. Two daggers, one hole. Such dazzling skill seemed to kill the cheerful mood. The surrounding panorama grew faint and hazy.

In a flash, Yuen and Zhang felt the return of their five senses. They were struck by a completely different sensation. It would have

driven an ordinary person mad.

Surrounding them were the creations of some insane god. One directly in front of them resembled a giant crab, carapace almost ten feet across. The waving pincers could slice and dice a half-dozen human beings in seconds flat.

The carapace was densely studded with horn-like protuberances. The legs supporting the huge frame were less those of a crustacean and more those of a large feline animal like a lion or tiger.

The creatures serving the giant crab were equally strange, globes six feet in diameter whose "faces" were so furrowed and wrinkled that their entire bodies resembled a ball of inch-thick yarn.

Two red eyeballs jutted out from the middle of the crab's carapace. The one on the left oozed oily black fluid. This was the creature that had aroused the hallucinations Yuen and Zhang had seen.

The peaceful park was already a memory. The pristine sidewalks were caked with moss. A carpet of strange, dirty weeds painted the lawn in a nauseating color that the cool moonlight couldn't disguise.

The pincers loomed over them. The claws fastened around Yakou's head and torso. But instead of slicing him in two, the steely blades flew apart at the joints. As if careful aim had been taken, the shattered claws buried themselves into the globes flanking the giant crab.

Yakou didn't run. The remaining pincer lashed out with a renewed groan. He didn't block it, but matched the movement and

dodged out of the way, the palm of his left hand sliding along the claw.

The direction of the claw changed, also a surprise to the crab. The sharpened tips stabbed directly into the crab's soft underbelly, guided by Yakou's left hand.

The crab toppled over with a freakish scream. A pale writhing mass eclipsed Yakou's view—the tentacles shooting out from the living globes on either side of him. White smoke erupted where the tentacles came in contact with the ground.

The fleshy body of the giant crab dissolved and decomposed from the unimaginably strong acid.

Yakou said to his two subordinates, "Let's get out of here." He sprinted into the forest on the right.

He could sense the tentacles coming after them. Yuen and Zhang were behind him. He glanced over his shoulder. The two of them bounded right and left. The tentacles pursued them. A strategy to guarantee Yakou's escape.

A glint of light. The good six feet of the tentacle aimed at Yuen's back tore away and impaled itself into an elm tree with a burst of white smoke.

Yakou directed his attention at Zhang. The tentacle was drawing back, split vertically down the middle. The acid dripping into the stream turned the water into billowing gas that concealed the retreating enemy.

"You okay?"

“Yes,” said Yuen, running up to him.

“And Zhang?” Emotion flickered across his stern features.

“Here.”

The calm, quiet voice came from beyond the stand of trees, lower down. They ran over. The slope turned into a steep cliff-like embankment. Zhang was standing in a thicket about six feet down, looking at the slope behind him.

“What?” There was expectation in Yakou’s voice.

“That tentacle—it may have done us a surprising favor.” He pointed at the mound of earth.

Yakou jumped down. He understood as soon as he landed. A hole was gouged into the side of the embankment. His instincts told him that it was something much more than a mere cave.

It was a gate that just might lead them to the kingdom of those troublesome vampires.

Chapter Three

The three men stood silently in front of the cave—the mouth partially obscured by green grass—like the dead waiting on the shores of the River Styx.

Yakou went first. Yuen after him. Zhang brought up the rear. The moonlight glittered briefly and then was gone. Even here in the infamous DMZ—the most dangerous place in Shinjuku—they were phantoms in the dark.

Cool drops struck their cheeks and necks, the dew shaking off the ground. The cave seemed a natural formation. The roots hanging from the ceiling and squirming around their feet seemed proof of the fact.

Their footsteps glided along. The roots blocking them sprang out of the way before touching them. Or rather, were cut away, leaving only the cleanly severed ends. After all, that's why they were here. Not only to capture and detain. Not just to kill. But to exterminate.

The change was sudden and drastic. Yuen and Zhang shouted and jumped back into the darkness.

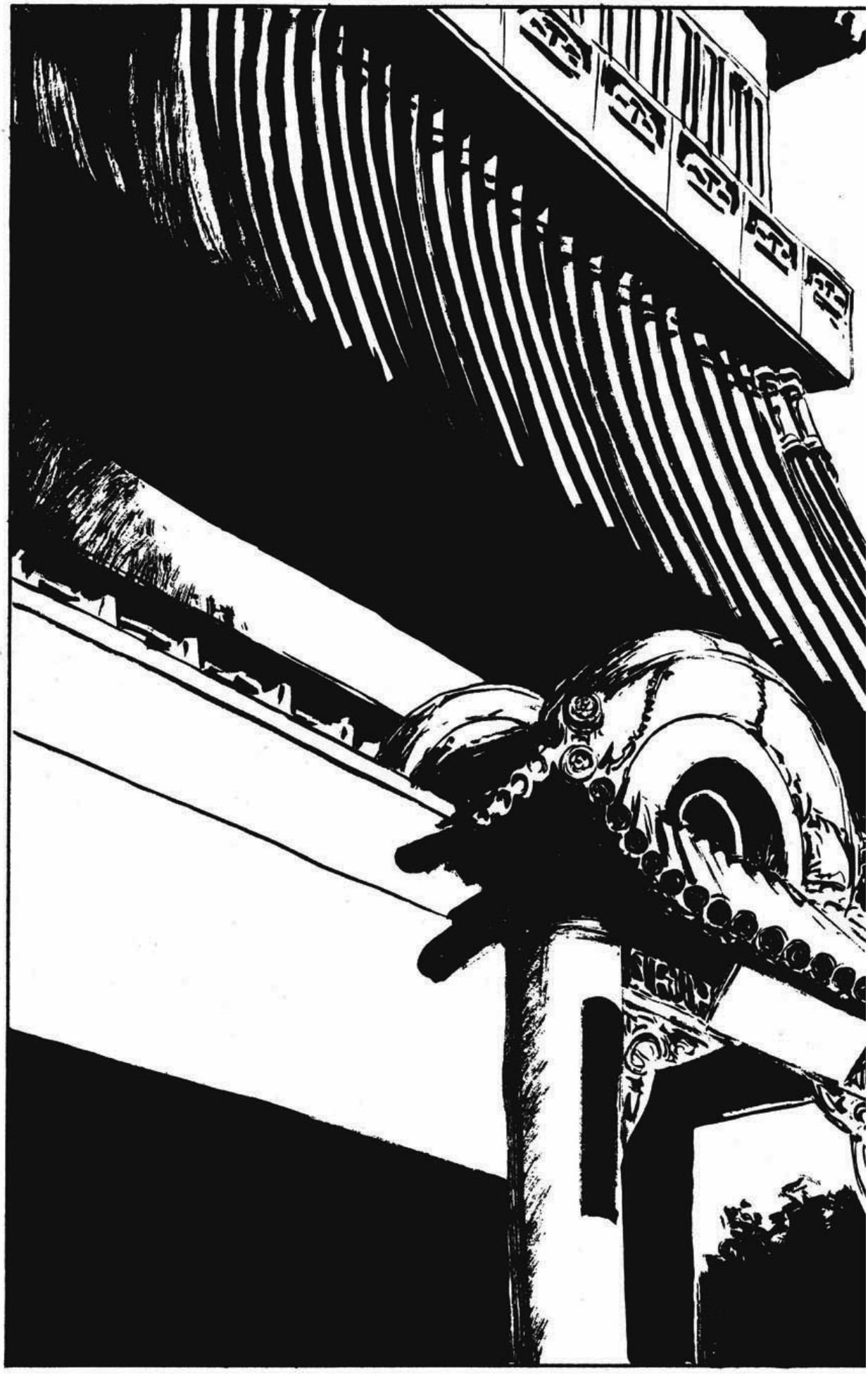
The sky above was filled with light.

"Don't panic. That sun isn't real."

"Yeah." They'd already figured that out.

"I wonder if *they* see this same dream," Yakou mused to himself.

The path meandered toward a forest off in the distance. Above and beyond the line of the trees—so densely arrayed they looked shrouded in mist—soared an enormous rusty brown wall. And beyond the wall, the blue-green mountains. Their objective surely lay in the direction of that wall.



“Let’s go,” said Yakou.

Three sets of footsteps left their depressions in the ground. They arrived at the foot of the ramparts two hours later. The sun hadn’t moved in the sky. The rustling wind and the sound of singing birds hadn’t changed either.

An ordinary afternoon.

Having become Daji’s slave, perhaps the Shang Dynasty’s Emperor Zhou had also lived in this false, eternal daytime, rubbing his red and swollen eyes and coveting sleep.

“Yakou-sama, there seems to be a gate here.”

The path ran along the wall until it was sucked into a cavern-like entrance beneath a soaring arch. It was wide enough to admit a brigade of cavalry fifty horses wide, and was secured by a rusted red iron gate.

Yakou went up to the gate. He peeled off a strip of rusted metal and crushed it between his fingers. With a sharp sting, it crumbled into powder and drifted to the ground.

“Though this is a fabricated world, time wears away at it. And yet life here could hardly be called life.”

“That would seem to be the case. I doubt it would open at the asking. Shall we jump over?” He looked up at the top of the gate.

A screeching sound like giant claws scraping on a blackboard pounded at their eardrums.

“Look—the gate—”

“It’s opening. What’s that noise—”

A thread-like fissure ran down the middle of the rust-caked iron gates. It widened to the width of a narrow stream and finally stopped.

Yakou said to the men on either side of him, “Did that damage your ears?”

“Apparently.”

Yuen and Zhang nodded. Thin lines of red ran down their necks. The groaning of the gates was some sort of acoustic weapon designed to drive any cavalry attacking the gate mad. It had ruptured the eardrums of these two elites. They responded to Yakou’s question by reading his lips.

Whatever had projected that weapon at them was not physically there. Only its disembodied will stubbornly existed within these walls.

The gap in the gate was just wide enough for them to enter three abreast. No more, no less.

“Let’s stick together.”

“Got it.”

They passed through the gate single file.

The world inside the gate was a heaven and an earth unto itself. The ground was densely planted with trees and plants and shrubs. Fig trees and dandelions and patrinia and Chinese bellflower bloomed with wild abandon around the arbors and along the banks

of the brimming primeval lakes, in complete disregard to the season.

Hearing the flapping of wings, they looked up to see gorgeous phoenix birds flying through the air. Their eyes were drawn to the magnificent manor house rising eerily above the dense carpet of greenery.

“Unbelievable,” Zhang muttered. “This must be a different dimension. If it was part of our world, it would be filled with gloom. Beings who thrive on darkness should not be surrounded by so much light.”

“What do you think, Yakou-sama?”

The young clan leader didn’t respond to Yuen’s question, but looked at the brilliant flocks of color arrayed along the banks of the lake. Peacocks. One spread its tail feathers. The dazzling colors of a hallucinatory sunset were entrancing.

A second later, Yuen and Zhang bounded to the right and left. They’d been carefully following the every move of their leader, and before they knew it, he’d extended his right hand toward the peacocks.

What sent the two of them scurrying—the alarm evident on their faces—was the strange demonic force welling up around the birds. It engulfed them. The beautiful birds were reduced to white bones tumbling to the earth, their skeletons crushed like tissue paper.

“As I expected,” said Yuen.

“It was a facade,” said Zhang.

They couldn't help but admire such beguiling evil. Another voice mingled with theirs, rumbling like a tremor in the earth while descending from the sky.

"And you saw through it. Those who press on ignorant of what this world contains will be consumed by it before they get far. Bless their souls."

The voice ceased. Yakou smiled thinly.

"What do you think?" asked Yuen, sensitive to every flicker of emotion on Yakou's face.

Yakou said, "Useless pretenders are everywhere, twiddling their thumbs and biding their time."

"Eh?"

"Let's go. Our objective is the manor house. Hold on tight."

The three came together and soared into the sky. Yakou selected the veranda that wrapped around the top story of the manor house as his landing point. The silence flowed back as he folded his wings, uninterrupted by even the song of a bird.

His two subordinates looked to him for his next command and saw that he was temporarily lost in thought.

"What's on your mind?" Zhang asked softly. As he couldn't hear what Zhang had said, Yuen continued to train his eyes on the world around them.

"Though this world is an artifice, a deception—what is the true nature of the make-believe?"

“The what?”

“That peacock, this manor, the surrounding groves and forests, that blue lake, those mountains—we do not have the resources to investigate, yet it concerns me. The answer seems to be on the tip of my tongue—at least, that’s what my intuition is telling me.”

“So you’re staying that this world itself is within our ability to comprehend?”

“I don’t think it would be presumptuous to assume so,” Yakou said in his normally placid tone of voice. His mostly deaf subordinates made do by reading his lips.

“I don’t really understand it, but it’s not so different from what we see in the course of our everyday lives—”

“Understand that much and its destruction becomes more than just a dream. To the extent that these living quarters are in regular use, their loss would be extremely damaging.”

“Precisely. But a deception this grand in scale—how should we deal with it by ourselves—”

“Not a task for the faint of heart,” Yakou said with a thin but fearless smile. After all, he was the Elder’s grandson.

“Somebody’s coming,” Zhang said in a low voice. He hadn’t heard footsteps, but sensed an approaching presence.

The three men disappeared in a flash. Kikiou emerged from a corridor on the right, walking quickly down the veranda. He gave no indication that he knew they were there.

A black shadow alighted on the eaves above his head. It was strange that Kikiou—who had before raised the hairs on the back of Setsura's neck—didn't notice it, but such was Zhang's mastery of the cloaking technique that disguised them.

A long, slender blade like the leaf of a willow tree pressed against his neck. "This is—" the old man said in a dry voice.

"I don't expect you wish for an early death," Yuen whispered.

Kikiou's mouth cracked open. A thin line of spittle formed a web between his upper and lower lips. "Who are you?"

"Don't play the fool, Kikiou. You are a Hsia Dynasty warlock. You must have seen us coming for some time now. Surely you heard the creaking of that gate."

Kikiou's surprised eyes flitted to and fro. It wasn't an act. He really couldn't identify the source of the voice. A voice that sounded like it descended from the heavens and roiled up from the earth, a voice that nobody else but the person in question heard.

A self-satisfied smile rose to Kikiou's face. "Ah, the Elder's scion. I heard your name was Yakou. Do you remember me? We met once, back when the wings on your back were barely bigger than a chick's."

"My grandfather told me," Yakou said without speaking. "But there is only one thing I wish to know now. Where is your master?"

"Do you think I would confess that fact to you?"

"When you witness us destroying your place of rest, you will

change your mind. Perhaps she comes home to the false day and finds herself sleeping in the true sunlight."

"Bastard—" Kikiou's body trembled. In this false world, his stark horror was the real thing. "Do you fear time? The glories of immortality? May heaven curse such fools!"

A red line blossomed on his throat. Yuen's blade moved. The scarlet line grew and became a ribbon, welling up and pouring down.

"Walk."

"As you wish. Let us proceed. These four-thousand-year-old bones still hold life dear."

Kikiou stepped forward. Yuen stuck to him like a monkey on his back. From his gliding steps, it was clear that he did not feel Yuen's weight.

They entered the manor, passed down a gray hallway, and descended a flight of stairs. As large and resplendent as the manor house was from the outside, on the inside there looked to be no beginning and no end.

Kikiou stopped in front of a heavy wooden door.

"Here?" asked Yakou directly behind him. Up till now, Kikiou hadn't sensed he was there at all.

"Yes."

"You first."

"No, I insist. I do not wish to witness any of your villainous deeds."

The cold, hard metal pressed against the nape of his neck. Kikiou drew a long, shallow breath. On the verge of penetrating the base of his skull, the tip of the short sword withdrew.

It was hard to believe that someone like Kikiou should so willingly bow to the demands of these invaders without any show of resistance. Yakou must have suspected he still had something up his sleeve, and so ordered him to take the point.

“Next time, it’ll go deep enough for you to taste it.”

“I am well aware of that.”

Kikiou picked up a wooden mallet hanging next to the door and struck the oak sounding board hanging from the ceiling. A smooth depression had been pounded into the wood by the innumerable strikes of that mallet.

“Who is it?” asked a woman’s voice. The lascivious echoes in that voice would excite the loins of a man with a heart of stone and veins filled with ice water.

“It is Kikiou.”

“State your business.”

“Ryuuki and Setsura Aki squared off against each other.”

“Oh? And?”

“I’ve brought along Setsura’s right-hand man.”

“Then come in.”

That instruction was accompanied by the metallic *click* of the

lock mechanism releasing. Without any force being applied, the door opened and swung inward.

"Good job," said Yuen.

Again the blade was pressed against Kikiou's neck. But this time the edge sank through the flesh and muscle, down to the bone and through to the other side. All with a deceptive ease. The old man's head tumbled to his feet and came to a halt, the eyes peering up at the now headless body, standing there motionless.

Three men pushed it aside and advanced deeper into the blue world. The magnificent room was more than twenty feet long by thirty feet wide. Stealthily, with nary a glance at the antique furnishings and decor, they pursued their singular objective—waiting there like a treasure chest of precious jewels at the bottom of Davy Jones' locker.

Six eyes focused on the black casket, covered by a curtain of sheer silk that looked like a hazy, wet morning. They too dreamed scarlet dreams while slumbering in very similar beds.

In accordance to the ancient rites, Yakou in the center, Zhang behind him and to his right, Yuen guarding the left flank, his back to him. Nobody spoke. It was still. Deathly still.

Yuen reached back between his shoulder blades with his right hand and drew out a black stake. The tip of the yard-long steel bar was sharper than the point of a needle.

With equally reverential movements, Zhang pulled from his back a white wooden stake. Yakou took it with both hands. Switching to a

backhand grip, he chanted a curse of the night that only their kind understood.

Zhang retreated a step. The blade of his short sword glittered in the faint light. He concealed it behind him and waited.

Yakou would strike first, driving the stake through the heart. Then Yuen would immobilize the body by pinning the vampire through the abdomen to the bottom of the casket. Finally, as the *coup de grace*, Zhang would sever the head with his short sword.

"Who are you?"

The strength of demonic force in the voice—spilling as if from cracks in the casket—checked the advancing Yakou.

"You killed my grandfather on a hill in Toyama. This isn't the time for you to be taking a nap."

He sensed a breath being taken.

"I see. You are the Elder's grandson. They say your name is Yakou. And you came all the way to see me. You do know that there are traps everywhere?"

"I've known all along," said Yakou, adjusting his grip on the stake.

A quiver transmitted down the shaft from his hand, the thin sliver of wood inexorably devouring the outpouring waves of his power. But the movement was so slight it drew no attention to itself. Not even his fingers moved.

"I'm leaving. We shall see if your stake is quicker than I am."

In the same breath—the lid of the casket flew open with great force, with great intention—and flew end over end at Yakou's face.

Yuen's iron lance and Zhang's short sword stopped it. Skewered down the middle, the lid split in two, revealing the white figure rising out of the casket.

A scream shattered the air like a sonic boom—the frustrated cry of the woman in white—and Yakou's roar as he soared over her head and buried the stake into her heart with all his might.

Chapter Four

The two of them seem to freeze in the air—in reality, only a split second elapsed—in a kind of embrace. Then a red flower blossomed across the back of her white gown.

A moment later, their two bodies thumped down into the casket like two sides of beef.

"*You—and—that—fucking—Doctor Mephisto—*" She spat out the curses as she reached for Yakou's throat with her claw-like hands.

Yuen's iron lance—sending the spasms of her death throes through the gossamer-clad body—finally brought that action to a halt. With a single blow, it nailed her torso to the bottom of the casket and to the marble platform below it.

Roaring with the ferocity of a wounded beast, she grasped the steel bar with both hands and tried to pull it out. The metal seared her palms. The incandescent energy pierced her hands. It combined with the lifeforce pouring from the hole in her chest and raced through her body, shattering her nervous system and freezing her frame in a tattered rigor mortis. The lance didn't budge.

"*Hiii—*" A fountain of black blood followed the high-pitched scream that burst from her mouth. A heavy sound struck the bottom of the casket. All other sounds ceased except for the breathing of her assassins, who otherwise had no need to breathe.

They looked with emotion down at the tattered clothing and gray residue in the casket. “Envious?” Yakou asked.

“A little,” Yuen answered.

Zhang said solemnly, “We long for death but lack the courage to die. I have to believe that one day the Reaper will come for us, too.”

“Let’s go.”

The three turned toward the door. A black silhouette stood before them. It was Kikiou.

“Dying once wasn’t enough?” Yuen asked, no hint of surprise in his voice.

“Do you know how many times we have died?” Kikiou said breezily. He was the same size as before, his voice the same, but the fierceness of the *qi* surging from his entire being induced in Yuen and Zhang waves of unease.

“Look.” With his staff, Kikiou pointed behind them.

After exchanging glances, the three assassins turned to see. A woman was standing next to the casket. The elegance that defined the meaning of “princess” graced her features. On her face was a bewitching smile.

“A pretender,” Yakou muttered.

“Exactly. The real Princess was otherwise engaged this evening.” He laughed. “As you don’t have long to live, there’s no sense in denying you the truth. She is visiting the girl whose blood she took at Mephisto Hospital. Takako Kanan.”

A touch of color rose to Yakou's refined face. His subordinates had taken Takako from the hospital and were now guarding her. They were the best of the breed. But they couldn't be expected to stand in the way of someone who had so easily killed his grandfather.

"Yes, it is as you fear," Kikiou said, as if reading his mind. He smiled derisively. "None of our enemies has ever prevented a visit from her. A man surrounded himself by a thousand warriors. A man buried himself in a cave deep underground. They sought the sanctuary of priests and popes, of princes and kings. All that stood in her way died."

"And what became of them?"

"Some are spared. The remainder die ordinary deaths. Not everyone who gives Princess his blood meets with her approval. In the bowels of the earth or at the bottom of the sea, they await her visit—never knowing the outcome—dreaming dreams from which they never wake. From among their number only two have been chosen."

"Ryuuki and Shuuran."

"Oh? You know them?"

"Where are they now? I don't sense them here."

"If you desire an introduction, I'll leave a note. *He* departed to confront Setsura Aki. As I haven't heard from him since, he has undoubtedly blundered again. But not to worry. The assassin of all assassins accompanies Princess. Once Setsura has been drawn out by the bait that is Miss Takako, the outcome I desire will finally be

realized."

"Not if I can help it."

Yakou's two subordinates took up their positions to the right and to the left. Into the blue, bottomless darkness seeped a bloodlust as pointed as the merciless cold of the Arctic Ocean.

That night, Doctor Mephisto canceled all of his appointments and holed up in his underground laboratory. Though that was what he called it, the hospital staff and patients alike referred to it as the "Resurrection Room."

Most of the miracle drugs that saved their lives—that earned Mephisto Hospital the moniker of the "Devil's ER"—emerged from behind this steel door that no one else had seen.

But there was something *off* about Mephisto this night. His countenance was as comely as ever. His manner as elegant as ever. And yet something wasn't quite *right*.

He was just about to open the door when he glanced behind him. That demonic gleam in his eyes meant that the laboratory was a dangerous place indeed this night.

No record existed of what was kept in that room.

Mephisto only had one objective in mind. Ignoring the potted plants, the bottles filled with specimens, he crossed the room and headed for one particular corner. He reached inside his cape and took out a large key. The gleaming black skeleton key must certainly match some old lock that secured the most abominable of secrets.

No keyhole was visible. Instead, Mephisto pressed the key against a point in the "wall" and turned it to the right. A portion of the wall silently slid up, approximately six feet wide. It rose up and up until it was lost in the darkness.

The "door" revolved smoothly, exposing the glass-walled interior. If the glass shelves had been any more transparent, the mountain of bottles stacked on them would appear to be floating in the air.

Mephisto remained still for several long minutes. The Demon Physician hesitated before the immense rows of glass shelves, along the surface of which ran a series of "X" marks. Inscribed on two crossed bronze panels was the following statement:

In joy and dread, I seal away these medicines. A curse on he who violates my will.

(signed)

– Doctor Mephisto

To be continued.

Afterword

I humbly submit to you *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess, Vol. II*. It's guaranteed to contain twice the intensity and excitement as the first installment. Vampires are indeed a captivating subject. They first entranced me, not in books, but at the movies.

Unfortunately I missed the theatrical debut of the Hammer Films masterpiece, *The Horror of Dracula* (1958). Many years later, a movie revival in my hometown left the black-clothed form of the peerless Dracula actor Christopher Lee imprinted upon my mind.

This movie gets the credit for the black slicker worn by Setsura Aki and the black Inverness coat worn by Gento Rouran in *The Demon King*.

Fearing he was being typecast, Lee didn't appear in the sequel, *The Brides of Dracula* (1960). Instead, David Peel took on the part of the vampire Baron Meinster, facing off against the critically-acclaimed Peter Cushing, who reprised the role of Dr. Van Helsing.

Peel was then in his forties, but thanks to the power of makeup, portrayed a man in his twenties. Many critics pointed to the missing *gravitas* that Lee had brought with him as a major flaw in the sequel, but this is nonsense. Both were equally talented and right for the part, as was Terence Fisher's direction.

More than anything, Hollywood special effects magic—vampires changing into bats, reflections not being seen in mirrors—even as

implemented by Hammer Films, made for a movie worth watching.

But the scariest moment—more than Baron Meinster himself—was watching the Baron's mother approaching Helsing from behind, her fanged mouth covered by a handkerchief, as he enters the castle to investigate. Then, after being bitten during the big action scene at the castle, Helsing cauterizes the wound with a red-hot poker.

Terrific scenes come one after the other. The solemn, somber music as Helsing presents the crucifix to the Baron is splendidly done.

Critically ranked along with those two films is, of course, the legendary Bela Lugosi in *Dracula* (1931). Back when I was going through my own "goth" phase in junior high school, I was just dying to see it. Perhaps granting my wish, the *Shock!* series of short films debuted on television (it was either the NET or NTV network).

I was happily rendered utterly incapable of studying, watching movies like the never-before-seen Lon Chaney, Jr. classic *The Wolf Man* (1941), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), witnessing Bela Lugosi face off against Boris Karloff in *The Black Cat* (1934), *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), and more.

Watching these silver screen gems was like having a full-blown film festival in my living room.

Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* was included in this series. In the amazing opening scene, shot on a huge set, Dwight Frye as the lawyer visits Dracula's castle. Lugosi in his black coat and white vest was a revelation as well. But what really sent a shiver down my spine was

the dubbing job done by Genzou Wakayama.

Perfect casting. By comparison, Masaaki Yajima's dubbing of Lon Chaney, Jr. in *Son of Dracula* (1943) sounded too young and too mellow. It made Dracula sound like Robert Vaughn as Napoleon Solo in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

In the United States, Lugosi is still remembered for his role as Dracula. To varying degrees, subsequent generations of actors have tended to rely on prosthetic fangs and red contact lenses and the inevitable disintegration scene. Compared to this dependence on special effects, Lugosi alone approached the role with only the five human senses as his raw materials.

But from my perspective, that aura of dread never rises to the degree that Lee communicates (albeit these were black and white films). When making his moves on a woman, Lugosi could be eerie and lascivious, but never grabs me by the throat. Something seems to be missing.

In that department, John Carradine as the slender, aristocratic Count Dracula in *House of Dracula* (1945) is much preferred.

Fans of westerns should recognize Carradine as the gambler Hatfield (cast alongside John Wayne) in John Ford's defining work, *Stagecoach* (1939). Carradine worked energetically into his eighties making B-grade horror flicks, but perhaps that early role came the closest to Bram Stoker's original vision.

When Carradine, sporting a luxurious head of hair and wearing a black cloak and silk hat, spells out Dracula's origins to Dr. Franz Edelmann (played by Onslow Stevens), you can cut the brooding

tension in the air with a knife.

Incidentally, Stevens had a lead role in Gordon Douglas's cult classic *Them!* (1954), alongside the great James Whitmore. Whitmore plays a police detective who discovers a colony of giant ants while investigating the disappearance of a little girl. Stevens is the army general sent to exterminate them.

I remember working as a Telex translator not long after the Montreal Olympics when his obituary came over the wires. Reading it struck in me a deep sense of nostalgia.

Actors like Frank Langella as Dracula look more like elementary school principals. What's that all about? Zero sense of menace or majesty. Jack Palance played *Dracula* in a 1973 version. The same Palance who played a merciless gun-for-hire in the western *Shane* (1953), which is at least in the right dramatic ballpark.

These casting decisions say a lot about the mind of the American female moviegoer. A Dracula character incorporated in the script in order to instill a sense of fear or awe can come across in Japan as silly, not at all "Dracula-like," or even the acme of absurdity.

The audience turnout for *Love at First Bite* (1979) made the point rather vividly. I attended the Langella film and there were maybe two other people in the theater. But *Love at First Bite* played to a packed house. On top of that, every time George Hamilton pulled a sad face, practically every woman in the place swooned.

When analyzing what women see in men, I concluded that it really is all about the face.

Well, that era has come and gone. At one end of the spectrum, today's vampires come across as rather fey, such as *Fright Night* (1985) with Chris Sarandon; or at the other end as violent juvenile delinquents, such as Kiefer Sutherland in *Lost Boys* (1987).

Nevertheless, I'm not the only one concluding that nobody has bested Christopher Lee's interpretation of the vicious, violent Dracula. Now with uncut editions available, I encourage everyone to give *The Horror of Dracula* another viewing.

This movie was the wellspring of an impressive number of fundamental elements found in the present-day genre. A stake being driven into a woman's body, the spurting of blood, smoke curling up from the scorched flesh when a crucifix is pressed against the vampire's skin—they all originated in this movie.

Well then, check out *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess, Vol. II* and see how I've revived them here.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Son of Dracula)

September 19, 1989

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 2

"This is the masterpiece of all vampire works I have ever created. I strongly believe that it's better than Vampire Hunter D."

-HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Four Chinese vampires have come to Demon City Shinjuku. Led by Princess – the legendary evil vampire queen of ancient China – elderly and vicious Kikiou, handsome and powerful Ryuuki, and wickedly alluring Shuuran are gaining in their plan to subjugate the city that lives on the edge of the demon abyss.

Demon City's No. 1 manhunter Setsura Aki enters Kikiou's deadly trap – a house full of supernatural reptiles – while Doctor Mephisto pays a visit to the vampires' hidden lair to face down Ryuuki.

Now the stakes are raised in this deadly game. As high officials across Shinjuku are conscripted into Princess's ranks, Setsura himself is bitten by Shuuran's vampire doll and shows signs of turning. Yakou, the new leader of the Toyama clan, journeys to the heart of Princess's unearthly manor – with stake in hand. And what deadly presence – held for 500 years in the dungeon of Princess's ghost ship – is the queen of the vampires about to unleash upon the citizens of Demon City?

From acclaimed Japanese horror writer Hideyuki Kikuchi (Vampire Hunter D, the Wicked City series) comes his next big novel series for the English-language audience: Yashakiden: The Demon Princess. With over two million copies sold in Japan and set in the popular Wicked City universe, this five-volume series is not to be missed by followers of Kikuchi's works, as well as fans of horror and the macabre.

NOVEL / FANTASY / HORROR US $13.95

ISBN 978-1-56970-146-1

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